

# **LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS**

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The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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## § A SIGNIFICANCE FOR A&P PARKING LOTS, OR LEARNING FROM LAS VEGAS

*"Substance for a writer consists not merely of those realities he thinks he discovers; it consists even more of those realities which have been made available to him by the literature and idioms of his own day and by the images that still have vitality in the literature of the past. Stylistically, a writer can express his feeling about this substance either by imitation, if it sits well with him, or by parody, if it doesn't."*<sup>1</sup>

Learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect. Not the obvious way, which is to tear down Paris and begin again, as Le Corbusier suggested in the 1920s, but another, more tolerant way; that is, to question how we look at things.

The commercial strip, the Las Vegas Strip in particular—the example par excellence (Figs. 1 and 2)—challenges the architect to take a positive, non-chip-on-the-shoulder view. Architects are out of the habit of looking nonjudgmentally at the environment, because orthodox Modern architecture is progressive, if not revolutionary, utopian, and puristic; it is dissatisfied with *existing* conditions. Modern architecture has been anything but permissive: Architects have preferred to change the existing environment rather than enhance what is there.

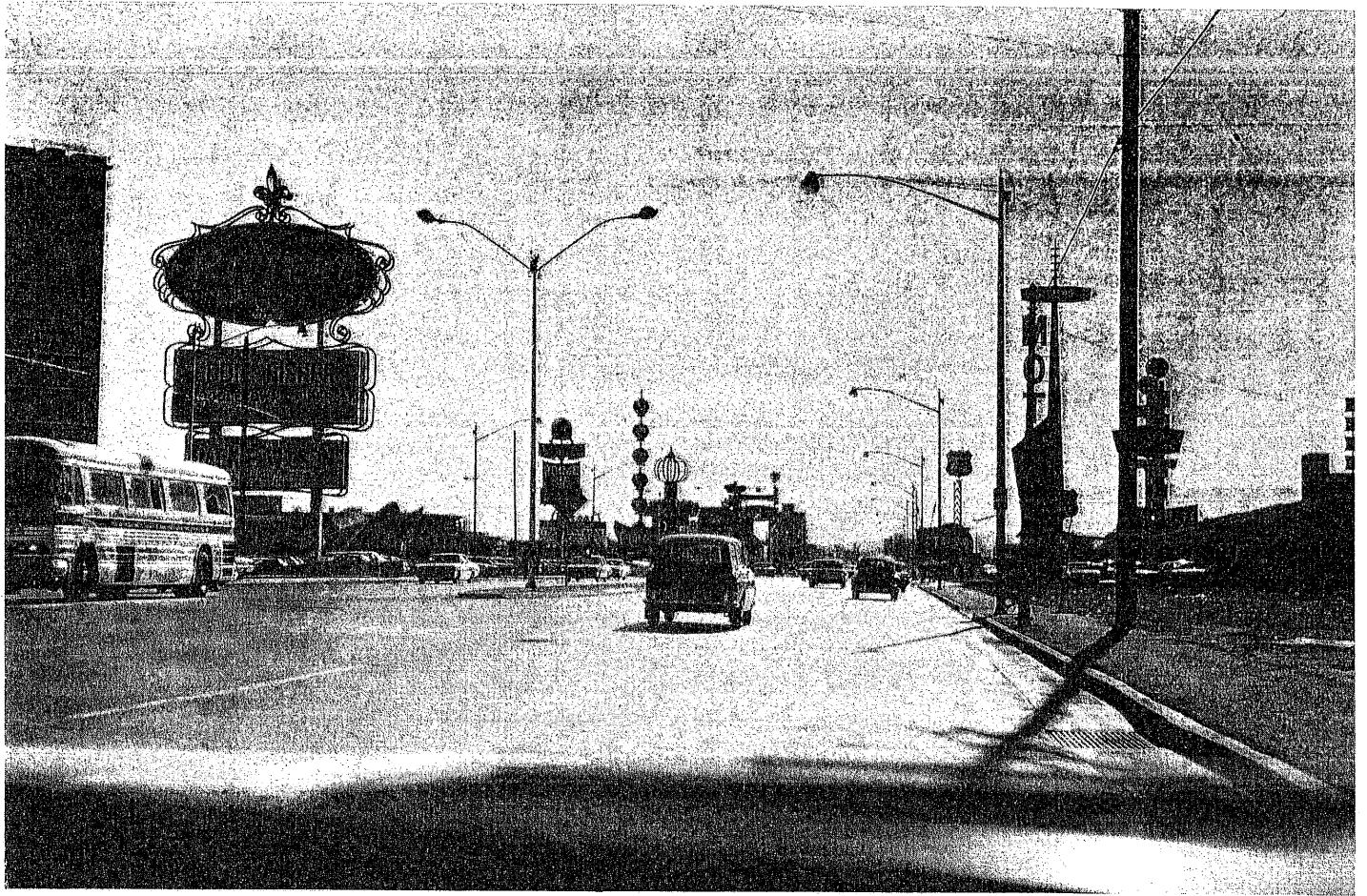
But to gain insight from the commonplace is nothing new: Fine art often follows folk art. Romantic architects of the eighteenth century discovered an existing and conventional rustic architecture. Early Modern architects appropriated an existing and conventional industrial vocabulary without much adaptation. Le Corbusier loved grain elevators and steamships; the Bauhaus looked like a factory; Mies refined the details of American steel factories for concrete buildings. Modern architects work through analogy, symbol, and image—although they have gone to lengths to disclaim almost all determinants of their forms except structural necessity and the program—and they derive insights, analogies, and stimulation from unexpected images. There is a perversity in the learning process: We look backward at history and tradition to go forward; we can also look downward to go upward. And withholding judgment may be used as a tool to make later judgment more sensitive. This is a way of learning from everything.

## § COMMERCIAL VALUES AND COMMERCIAL METHODS

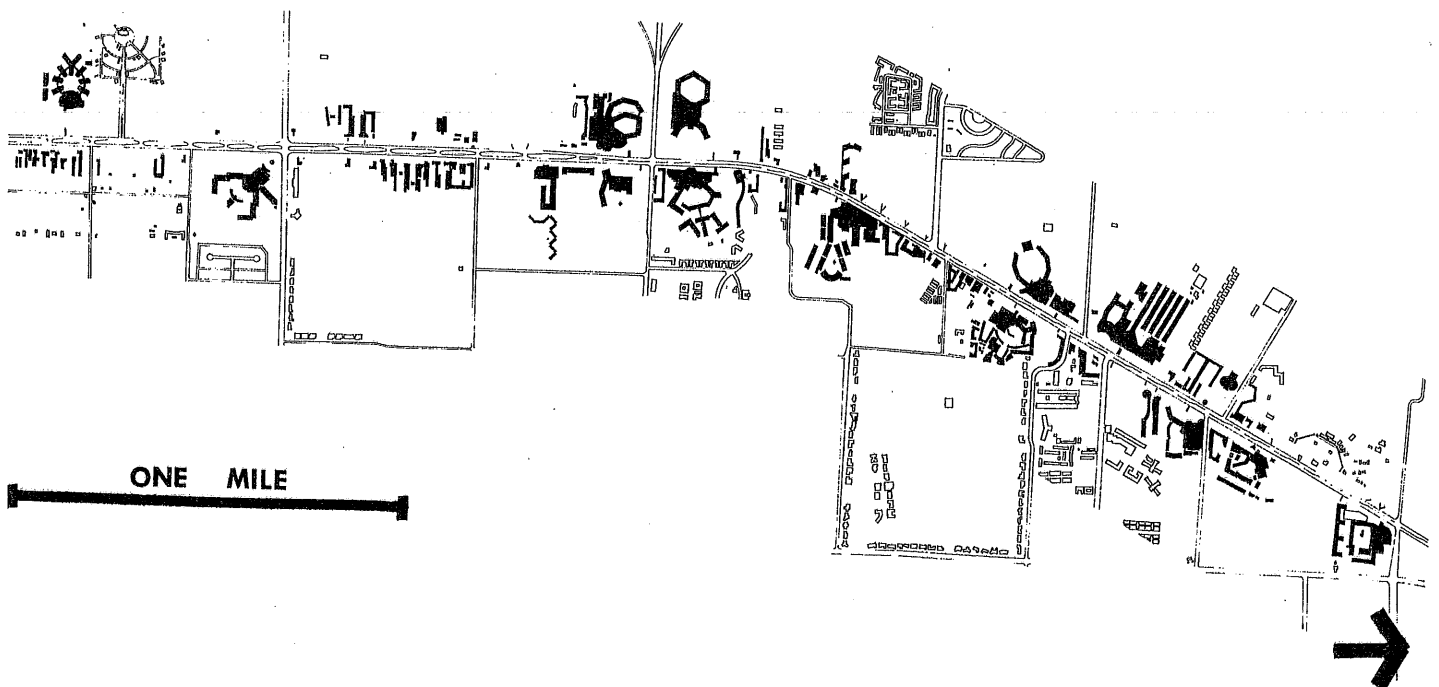
Las Vegas is analyzed here only as a phenomenon of architectural

§ See material under the corresponding heading in the Studio Notes section following Part I.

1. Richard Poirier, "T. S. Eliot and the Literature of Waste," *The New Republic* (May 20, 1967), p. 21.



1. The Las Vegas Strip, looking southwest



2. Map of Las Vegas Strip



communication. Just as an analysis of the structure of a Gothic cathedral need not include a debate on the morality of medieval religion, so Las Vegas's values are not questioned here. The morality of commercial advertising, gambling interests, and the competitive instinct is not at issue here, although, indeed, we believe it should be in the architect's broader, *synthetic* tasks of which an analysis such as this is but one aspect. The analysis of a drive-in church in this context would match that of a drive-in restaurant, because this is a study of method, not content. Analysis of one of the architectural variables in isolation from the others is a respectable scientific and humanistic activity, so long as all are resynthesized in design. Analysis of existing American urbanism is a socially desirable activity to the extent that it teaches us architects to be more understanding and less authoritarian in the plans we make for both inner-city renewal and new development. In addition, there is no reason why the methods of commercial persuasion and the skyline of signs analyzed here should not serve the purpose of civic and cultural enhancement. But this is not entirely up to the architect.

#### BILLBOARDS ARE ALMOST ALL RIGHT

Architects who can accept the lessons of primitive vernacular architecture, so easy to take in an exhibit like "Architecture without Architects," and of industrial, vernacular architecture, so easy to adapt to an electronic and space vernacular as elaborate neo-Brutalist or neo-Constructivist megastructures, do not easily acknowledge the validity of the commercial vernacular. For the artist, creating the new may mean choosing the old or the existing. Pop artists have relearned this. Our acknowledgment of existing, commercial architecture at the scale of the highway is within this tradition.

Modern architecture has not so much excluded the commercial vernacular as it has tried to take it over by inventing and enforcing a vernacular of its own, improved and universal. It has rejected the combination of fine art and crude art. The Italian landscape has always harmonized the vulgar and the Vitruvian: the *contorni* around the *duomo*, the *portiere's* laundry across the *padrone's portone*, *Supercortemaggiore* against the Romanesque apse. Naked children have never played in our fountains, and I. M. Pei will never be happy on Route 66.

#### ARCHITECTURE AS SPACE

Architects have been bewitched by a single element of the Italian landscape: the piazza. Its traditional, pedestrian-scaled, and intricately enclosed space is easier to like than the spatial sprawl of Route 66 and

Los Angeles. Architects have been brought up on Space, and enclosed space is the easiest to handle. During the last 40 years, theorists of Modern architecture (Wright and Le Corbusier sometimes excepted) have focused on space as the essential ingredient that separates architecture from painting, sculpture, and literature. Their definitions glory in the uniqueness of the medium; although sculpture and painting may sometimes be allowed spatial characteristics, sculptural or pictorial architecture is unacceptable—because Space is sacred.

Purist architecture was partly a reaction against nineteenth-century eclecticism. Gothic churches, Renaissance banks, and Jacobean manors were frankly picturesque. The mixing of styles meant the mixing of media. Dressed in historical styles, buildings evoked explicit associations and romantic allusions to the past to convey literary, ecclesiastical, national, or programmatic symbolism. Definitions of architecture as space and form at the service of program and structure were not enough. The overlapping of disciplines may have diluted the architecture, but it enriched the meaning.

Modern architects abandoned a tradition of iconology in which painting, sculpture, and graphics were combined with architecture. The delicate hieroglyphics on a bold pylon, the archetypal inscriptions of a Roman architrave, the mosaic processions in Sant'Apollinare, the ubiquitous tattoos over a Giotto Chapel, the enshrined hierarchies around a Gothic portal, even the illusionistic frescoes in a Venetian villa, all contain messages beyond their ornamental contribution to architectural space. The integration of the arts in Modern architecture has always been called a good thing. But one did not paint on Mies. Painted panels were floated independently of the structure by means of shadow joints; sculpture was in or near but seldom on the building. Objects of art were used to reinforce architectural space at the expense of their own content. The Kolbe in the Barcelona Pavilion was a foil to the directed spaces: The message was mainly architectural. The diminutive signs in most Modern buildings contained only the most necessary messages, like LADIES, minor accents begrudgingly applied.

#### ARCHITECTURE AS SYMBOL

Critics and historians, who documented the "decline of popular symbols" in art, supported orthodox Modern architects, who shunned symbolism of form as an expression or reinforcement of content: meaning was to be communicated, not through allusion to previously known forms, but through the inherent, physiognomic characteristics of form. The creation of architectural form was to be a logical process, free from images of past experience, determined solely by program and structure,

with an occasional assist, as Alan Colquhoun has suggested,<sup>2</sup> from intuition.

But some recent critics have questioned the possible level of content to be derived from abstract forms. Others have demonstrated that the functionalists, despite their protestations, derived a formal vocabulary of their own, mainly from current art movements and the industrial vernacular; and latter-day followers such as the Archigram group have turned, while similarly protesting, to Pop Art and the space industry. However, most critics have slighted a continuing iconology in popular commercial art, the persuasive heraldry that pervades our environment from the advertising pages of *The New Yorker* to the superbillboards of Houston. And their theory of the "debasement" of symbolic architecture in nineteenth-century eclecticism has blinded them to the value of the representational architecture along highways. Those who acknowledge this roadside eclecticism denigrate it, because it flaunts the cliché of a decade ago as well as the style of a century ago. But why not? Time travels fast today.

The Miami Beach Modern motel on a bleak stretch of highway in southern Delaware reminds jaded drivers of the welcome luxury of a tropical resort, persuading them, perhaps, to forgo the gracious plantation across the Virginia border called Motel Monticello. The real hotel in Miami alludes to the international stylishness of a Brazilian resort, which, in turn, derives from the International Style of middle Corbu. This evolution from the high source through the middle source to the low source took only 30 years. Today, the middle source, the neo-Eclectic architecture of the 1940s and the 1950s, is less interesting than its commercial adaptations. Roadside copies of Ed Stone are more interesting than the real Ed Stone.

#### § SYMBOL IN SPACE BEFORE FORM IN SPACE: LAS VEGAS AS A COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

The sign for the Motel Monticello, a silhouette of an enormous Chipendale highboy, is visible on the highway before the motel itself. This architecture of styles and signs is antispacial; it is an architecture of communication over space; communication dominates space as an element in the architecture and in the landscape (Figs. 1-6). But it is for a new scale of landscape. The philosophical associations of the old eclecticism evoked subtle and complex meanings to be savored in the docile spaces of a traditional landscape. The commercial persuasion of roadside eclecticism provokes bold impact in the vast and complex setting of a new landscape of big spaces, high speeds, and complex programs.

2. Alan Colquhoun, "Typology and Design Method," *Arena*, Journal of the Architectural Association (June 1967), pp. 11-14.

Styles and signs make connections among many elements, far apart and seen fast. The message is basely commercial; the context is basically new.

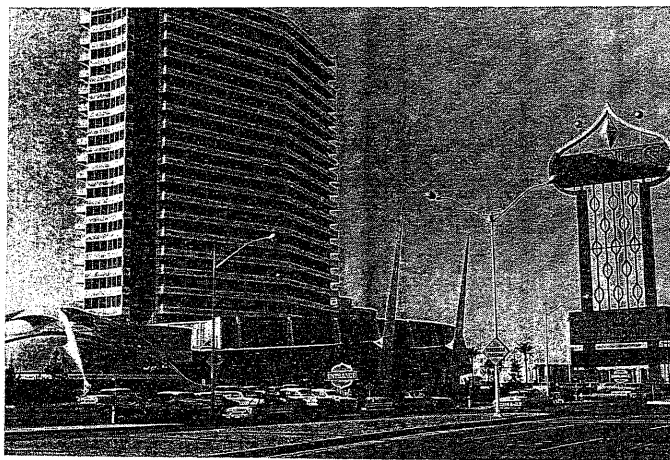
A driver 30 years ago could maintain a sense of orientation in space. At the simple crossroad a little sign with an arrow confirmed what was obvious. One knew where one was. When the crossroads becomes a cloverleaf, one must turn right to turn left, a contradiction poignantly evoked in the print by Allan D'Arcangelo (Fig. 7). But the driver has no time to ponder paradoxical subtleties within a dangerous, sinuous maze. He or she relies on signs for guidance—enormous signs in vast spaces at high speeds.

The dominance of signs over space at a pedestrian scale occurs in big airports. Circulation in a big railroad station required little more than a simple axial system from taxi to train, by ticket window, stores, waiting room, and platform—all virtually without signs. Architects object to signs in buildings: "If the plan is clear, you can see where to go." But complex programs and settings require complex combinations of media beyond the purer architectural triad of structure, form, and light at the service of space. They suggest an architecture of bold communication rather than one of subtle expression.

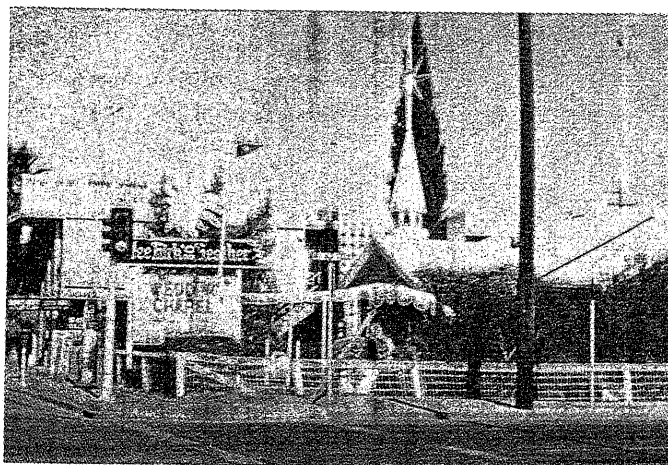
#### § THE ARCHITECTURE OF PERSUASION

The cloverleaf and airport communicate with moving crowds in cars or on foot for efficiency and safety. But words and symbols may be used in space for commercial persuasion (Figs. 6, 28). The Middle Eastern bazaar contains no signs; the Strip is virtually all signs (Fig. 8). In the bazaar, communication works through proximity. Along its narrow aisles, buyers feel and smell the merchandise, and the merchant applies explicit oral persuasion. In the narrow streets of the medieval town, although signs occur, persuasion is mainly through the sight and smell of the real cakes through the doors and windows of the bakery. On Main Street, shop-window displays for pedestrians along the sidewalks and exterior signs, perpendicular to the street for motorists, dominate the scene almost equally.

On the commercial strip the supermarket windows contain no merchandise. There may be signs announcing the day's bargains, but they are to be read by pedestrians approaching from the parking lot. The building itself is set back from the highway and half hidden, as is most of the urban environment, by parked cars (Fig. 9). The vast parking lot is in front, not at the rear, since it is a symbol as well as a convenience. The building is low because air conditioning demands low spaces, and merchandising techniques discourage second floors; its architecture is neutral because it can hardly be seen from the road. Both merchandise



3. Dunes Casino and Hotel, Las Vegas



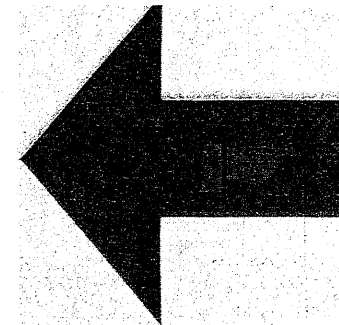
4. Wedding chapel, Las Vegas



5. Stardust Casino and Hotel, Las Vegas



6. Night messages, Las Vegas



7. Allan D'Arcangelo, *The Trip*

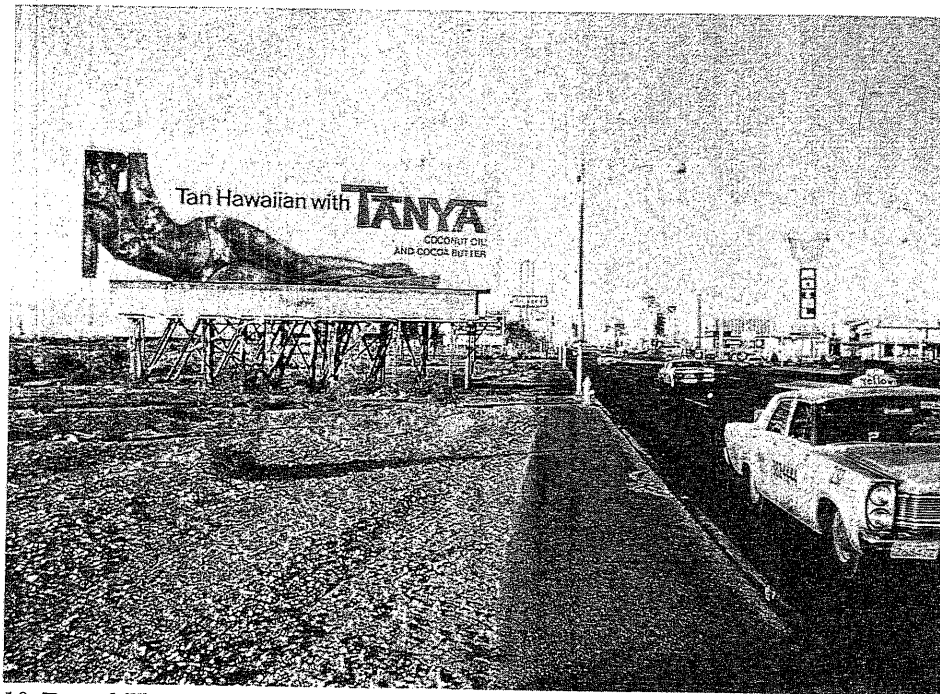
## DIRECTIONAL SPACE

	SPACE · SCALE	SPEED	SYMBOL sign-symbol·bldg ratio
EASTERN BAZAAR		3 M.P.H.	
MEDIEVAL STREET		3 M.P.H.	
MAIN STREET		3 M.P.H. 20 M.P.H.	W
COMMERCIAL STRIP		35 M.P.H.	
THE STRIP		35 M.P.H.	
SHOPPING CENTER		3 M.P.H. 50 M.P.H.	

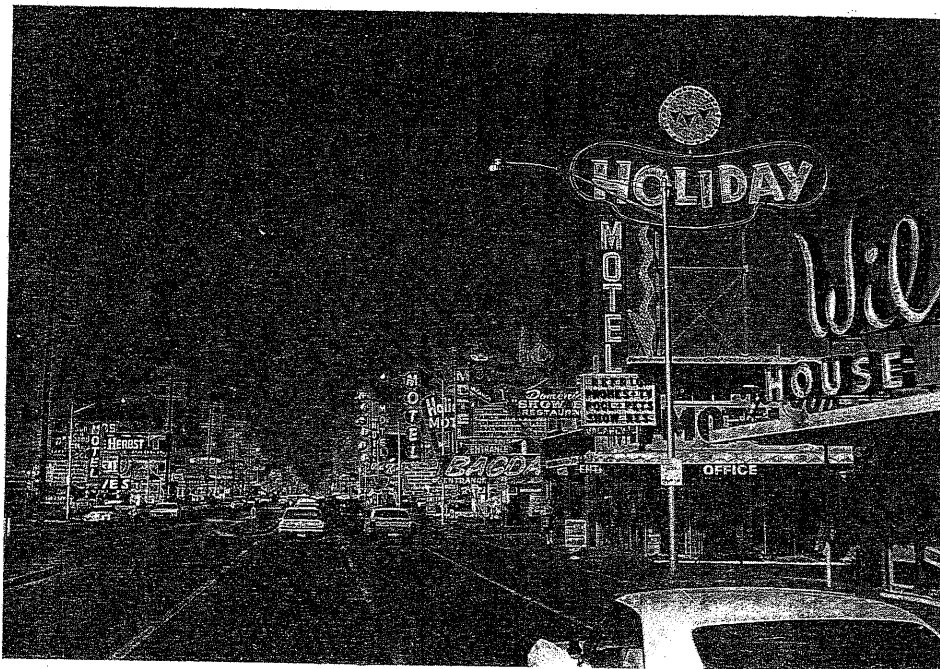
8. A comparative analysis of directional spaces



9. Parking lot of a suburban supermarket



10. Tanya billboard on the Strip



11. Lower Strip, looking north

and architecture are disconnected from the road. The big sign leaps to connect the driver to the store, and down the road the cake mixes and detergents are advertised by their national manufacturers on enormous billboards inflected toward the highway. The graphic sign in space has become the architecture of this landscape (Figs. 10, 11). Inside, the A&P has reverted to the bazaar except that graphic packaging has replaced the oral persuasion of the merchant. At another scale, the shopping center off the highway returns in its pedestrian malls to the medieval street.

#### § VAST SPACE IN THE HISTORICAL TRADITION AND AT THE A&P

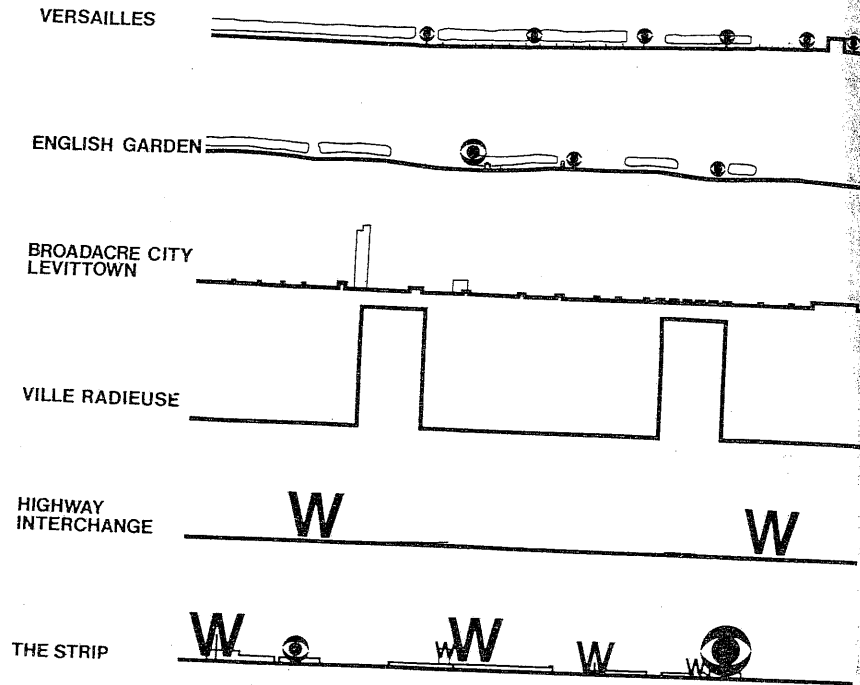
The A&P parking lot is a current phase in the evolution of vast space since Versailles (Fig. 12). The space that divides high-speed highway and low, sparse buildings produces no enclosure and little direction. To move through a piazza is to move between high enclosing forms. To move through this landscape is to move over vast expansive texture: the megatexture of the commercial landscape. The parking lot is the *parterre* of the asphalt landscape (Fig. 13). The patterns of parking lines give direction much as the paving patterns, curbs, borders, and *tapis vert* give direction in Versailles; grids of lamp posts substitute for obelisks, rows of urns and statues as points of identity and continuity in the vast space. But it is the highway signs, through their sculptural forms or pictorial silhouettes, their particular positions in space, their inflected shapes, and their graphic meanings, that identify and unify the megatexture. They make verbal and symbolic connections through space, communicating a complexity of meanings through hundreds of associations in few seconds from far away. Symbol dominates space. Architecture is not enough. Because the spatial relationships are made by symbols more than by forms, architecture in this landscape becomes symbol in space rather than form in space. Architecture defines very little: The big sign and the little building is the rule of Route 66.

The sign is more important than the architecture. This is reflected in the proprietor's budget. The sign at the front is a vulgar extravaganza, the building at the back, a modest necessity. The architecture is what is cheap. Sometimes the building is the sign: The duck store in the shape of a duck, called "The Long Island Duckling," (Figs. 14, 15) is sculptural symbol and architectural shelter. Contradiction between outside and inside was common in architecture before the Modern movement, particularly in urban and monumental architecture (Fig. 16). Baroque domes were symbols as well as spatial constructions, and they are bigger in scale and higher outside than inside in order to dominate their urban setting and communicate their symbolic message. The false fronts of



# VAST SPACE

## SPACE · SCALE



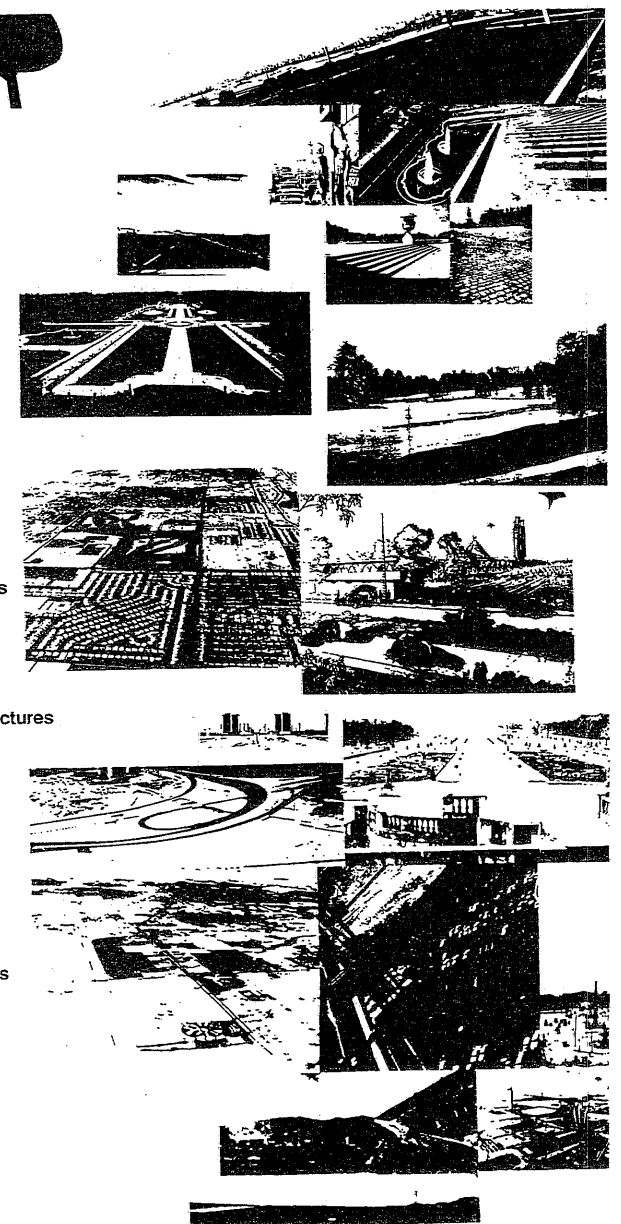
## SPACE · SCALE · SPEED · SYMBOL

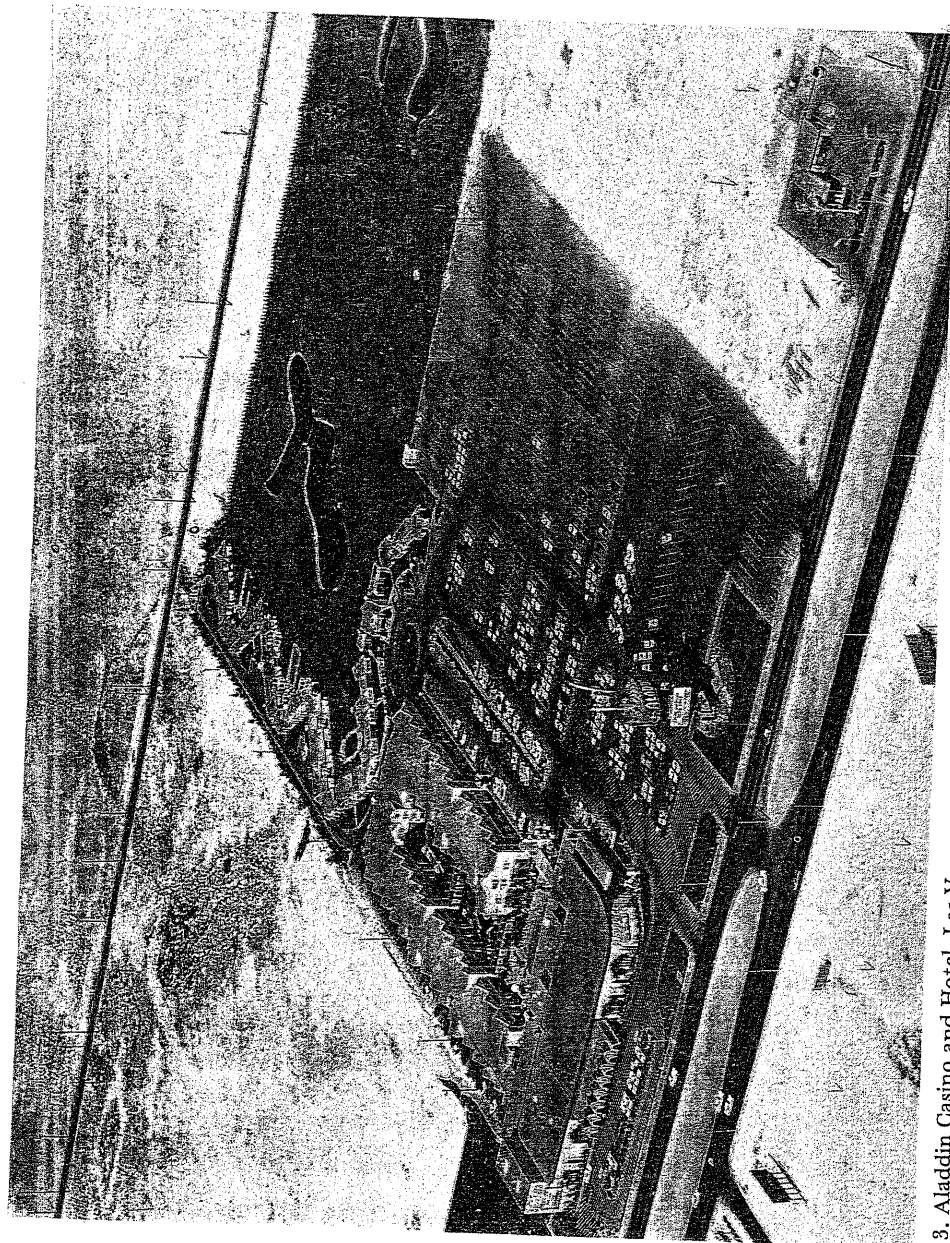
12. A comparative analysis of vast spaces

## SYMBOL

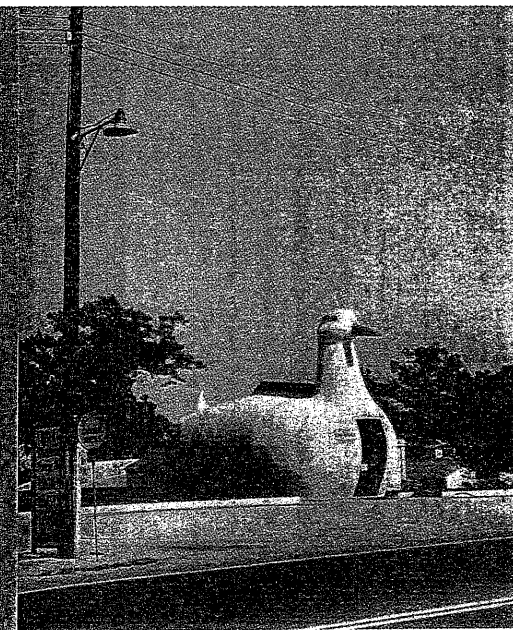
symbol word architecture  
● W ■ elements

- W ■ statues-urns  
fountains  
partere  
curbs
- W ■ trees  
runes  
temples of love
- usonian houses  
ranch houses
- proto-megastructures
- W green signs
- W ■ see other topics





13. Aladdin Casino and Hotel, Las Vegas

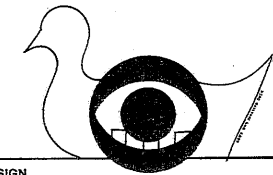


14. "The Long Island Duckling" from *God's Own Junkyard*

W

BIG SIGN - LITTLE BUILDING

OR



BUILDING IS SIGN

15. Big sign-little building or building as sign

## SCALE SPEED SYMBOL

AMIENS		persuader to enclosed space			
EGYPTIAN PYLON		space divider with civic messages			
TRIUMPHAL ARCH		complex-space connector			
ROMAN THEATRE		ambiguous back drop			
HIWAY BILLBOARD		vast-space persuader			
LAS VEGAS		vast-space connector			

16. A comparative analysis of "billboards" in space

Western stores did the same thing: They were bigger and taller than the interiors they fronted to communicate the store's importance and to enhance the quality and unity of the street. But false fronts are of the order and scale of Main Street. From the desert town on the highway in the West of today, we can learn new and vivid lessons about an impure architecture of communication. The little low buildings, gray-brown like the desert, separate and recede from the street that is now the highway, their false fronts disengaged and turned perpendicular to the highway as big, high signs. If you take the signs away, there is no place. The desert town is intensified communication along the highway.

### FROM ROME TO LAS VEGAS

Las Vegas is the apotheosis of the desert town. Visiting Las Vegas in the mid-1960s was like visiting Rome in the late 1940s. For young Americans in the 1940s, familiar only with the auto-scaled, gridiron city and the antiurban theories of the previous architectural generation, the traditional urban spaces, the pedestrian scale, and the mixtures, yet continuities, of styles of the Italian piazzas were a significant revelation. They rediscovered the piazza. Two decades later architects are perhaps ready for similar lessons about large open space, big scale, and high speed. Las Vegas is to the Strip what Rome is to the Piazza.

There are other parallels between Rome and Las Vegas: their expansive settings in the Campagna and in the Mojave Desert, for instance, that tend to focus and clarify their images. On the other hand, Las Vegas *was* built in a day, or rather, the Strip was developed in a virgin desert in a short time. It was not superimposed on an older pattern as were the pilgrim's Rome of the Counter-Reformation and the commercial strips of eastern cities, and it is therefore easier to study. Each city is an archetype rather than a prototype, an exaggerated example from which to derive lessons for the typical. Each city vividly superimposes elements of a supranational scale on the local fabric: churches in the religious capital, casinos and their signs in the entertainment capital. These cause violent juxtapositions of use and scale in both cities. Rome's churches, off streets and piazzas, are open to the public; the pilgrim, religious or architectural, can walk from church to church. The gambler or architect in Las Vegas can similarly take in a variety of casinos along the Strip. The casinos and lobbies of Las Vegas are ornamental and monumental and open to the promenading public; a few old banks and railroad stations excepted, they are unique in American cities. Nolli's map of the mid-eighteenth century reveals the sensitive and complex connections between public and private space in Rome (Fig. 17). Private building is shown in gray crosshatching that is carved into by the public spaces, exterior *and* interior. These spaces, open or

roofed, are shown in minute detail through darker poché. Interiors of churches read like piazzas and courtyards of palaces, yet a variety of qualities and scales is articulated.

### § MAPS OF LAS VEGAS

A "Nolli" map of the Las Vegas Strip reveals and clarifies what is public and what is private, but here the scale is enlarged by the inclusion of the parking lot, and the solid-to-void ratio is reversed by the open spaces of the desert. Mapping the Nolli components from an aerial photograph provides an intriguing crosscut of Strip systems (Fig. 18). These components, separated and redefined, could be undeveloped land, asphalt, autos, buildings, and ceremonial space (Figs. 19 *a-e*). Reassembled, they describe the Las Vegas equivalent of the pilgrims' way, although the description, like Nolli's map, misses the iconological dimensions of the experience (Fig. 20).

A conventional land-use map of Las Vegas can show the overall structure of commercial use in the city as it relates to other uses but none of the detail of use type or intensity. "Land-use" maps of the insides of casino complexes, however, begin to suggest the systematic planning that all casinos share (Fig. 21). Strip "address" and "establishment" maps can depict both intensity and variety of use (Fig. 22). Distribution maps show patterns of, for example, churches, and food stores (Figs. 24, 25) that Las Vegas shares with other cities and those such as wedding chapels and auto rental stations (Figs. 26, 27) that are Strip-oriented and unique. It is extremely hard to suggest the atmospheric qualities of Las Vegas, because these are primarily dependent on watts (Fig. 23), animation, and iconology; however, "message maps," tourist maps, and brochures suggest some of it (Figs. 28, 71).

### § MAIN STREET AND THE STRIP

A street map of Las Vegas reveals two scales of movement within the gridiron plan: that of Main Street and that of the Strip (Figs. 29, 30). The main street of Las Vegas is Fremont Street, and the earlier of two concentrations of casinos is located along three of four blocks of this street (Fig. 31). The casinos here are bazaarlike in the immediacy to the sidewalk of their clicking and tinkling gambling machines (Fig. 32). The Fremont Street casinos and hotels focus on the railroad depot at the head of the street; here the railroad and main street scales of movement connect. The depot building is now gone, replaced by a hotel, and the bus station is now the busier entrance to town, but the axial focus on the railroad depot from Fremont Street was visual, and possibly sym-

bolic. This contrasts with the Strip, where a second and later development of casinos extends southward to the airport, the jet-scale entrance to town (Figs. 23, 24, 42, 43, 52, 54).

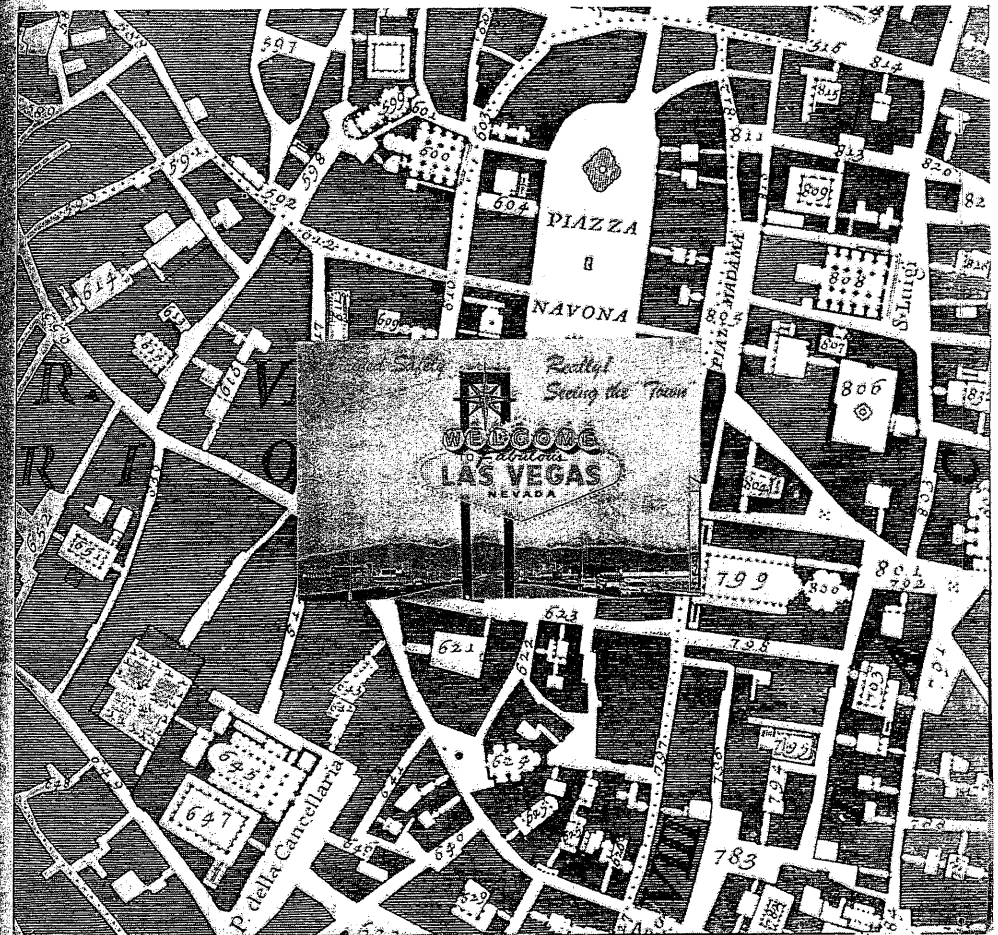
One's first introduction to Las Vegas architecture is a forebear of Eero Saarinen's TWA Terminal, which is the local airport building. Beyond this piece of architectural image, impressions are scaled to the car rented at the airport. Here is the unraveling of the famous Strip itself, which, as Route 91, connects the airport with the downtown (Fig. 33).

### § SYSTEM AND ORDER ON THE STRIP

The image of the commercial strip is chaos. The order in this landscape is not obvious (Fig. 34). The continuous highway itself and its systems for turning are absolutely consistent. The median strip accommodates the U-turns necessary to a vehicular promenade for casino crawlers as well as left turns onto the local street pattern that the Strip intersects. The curbing allows frequent right turns for casinos and other commercial enterprises and eases the difficult transitions from highway to parking. The streetlights function superfluously along many parts of the Strip that are incidentally but abundantly lit by signs, but their consistency of form and position and their arching shapes begin to identify by day a continuous space of the highway, and the constant rhythm contrasts effectively with the uneven rhythms of the signs behind (Fig. 35).

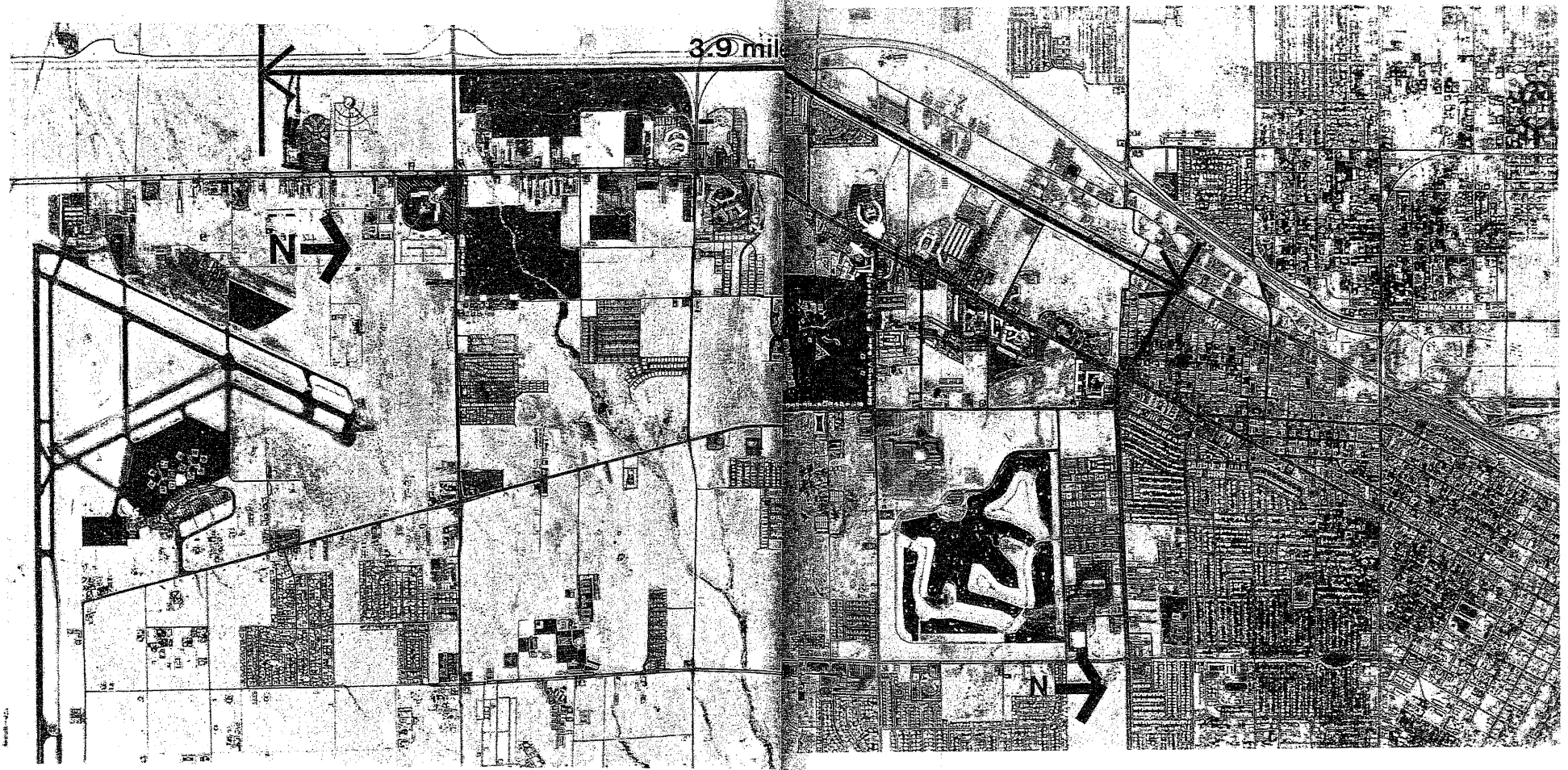
This counterpoint reinforces the contrast between two types of order on the Strip: the obvious visual order of street elements and the difficult visual order of buildings and signs. The zone *of* the highway is a shared order. The zone *off* the highway is an individual order (Fig. 36). The elements of the highway are civic. The buildings and signs are private. In combination they embrace continuity *and* discontinuity, going *and* stopping, clarity *and* ambiguity, cooperation *and* competition, the community *and* rugged individualism. The system of the highway gives order to the sensitive functions of exit and entrance, as well as to the image of the Strip as a sequential whole. It also generates places for individual enterprises to grow and controls the general direction of that growth. It allows variety and change along its sides and accommodates the contrapuntal, competitive order of the individual enterprises.

There is an order along the sides of the highway. Varieties of activities are juxtaposed on the Strip: service stations, minor motels, and multi-million-dollar casinos. Marriage chapels ("credit cards accepted") converted from bungalows with added neon-lined steeples are apt to appear anywhere toward the downtown end. Immediate proximity of related uses, as on Main Street, where you *walk* from one store to another, is

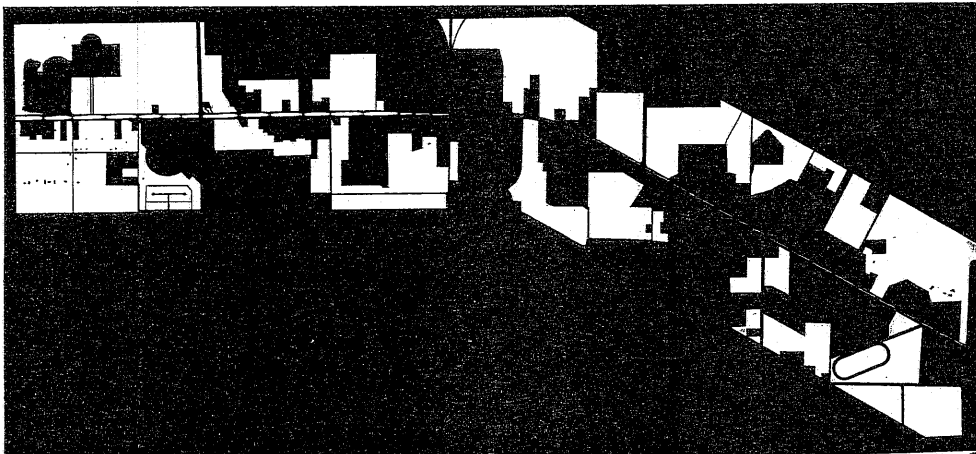


17. Nolli's Map of Rome (detail)

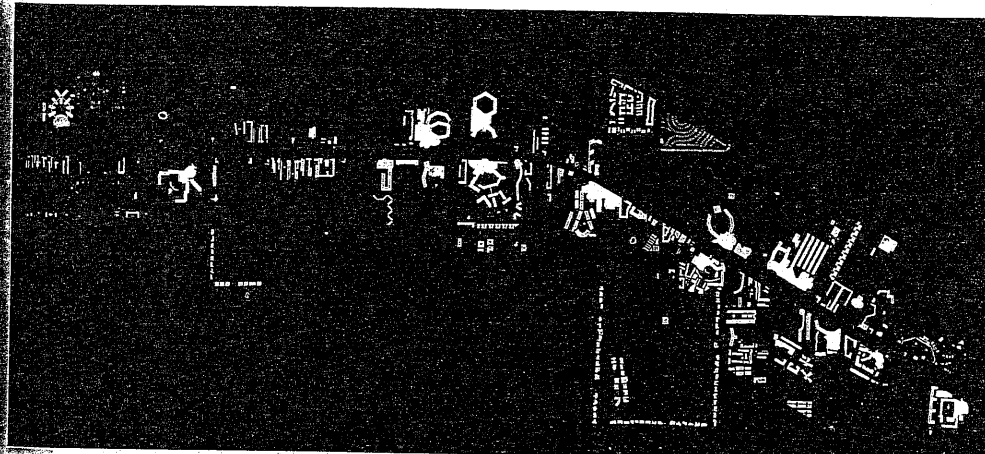




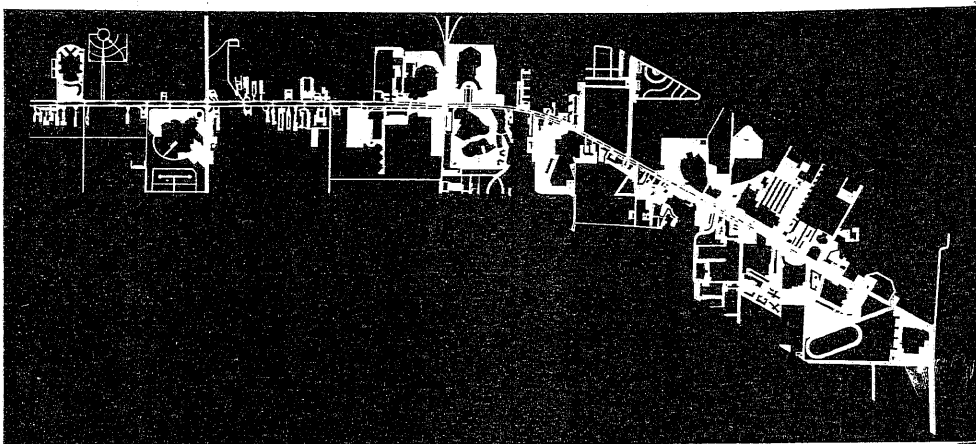
18. Aerial photograph of upper Strip



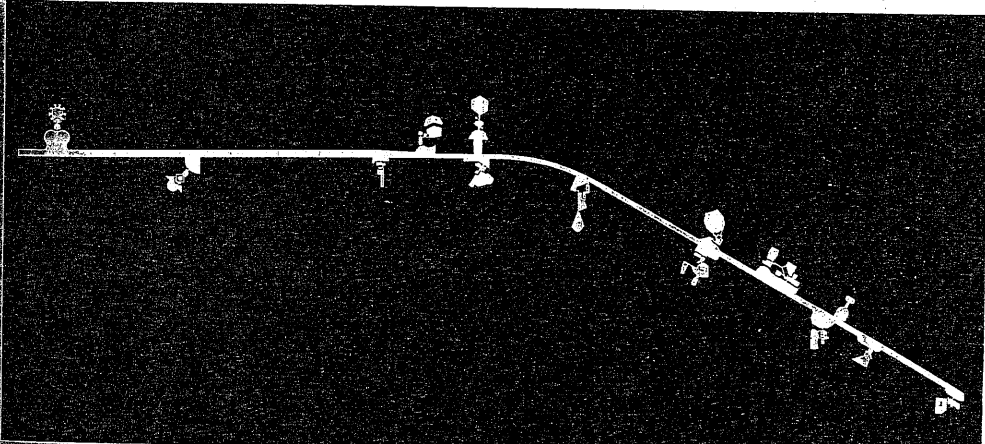
19a. Upper strip, undeveloped land



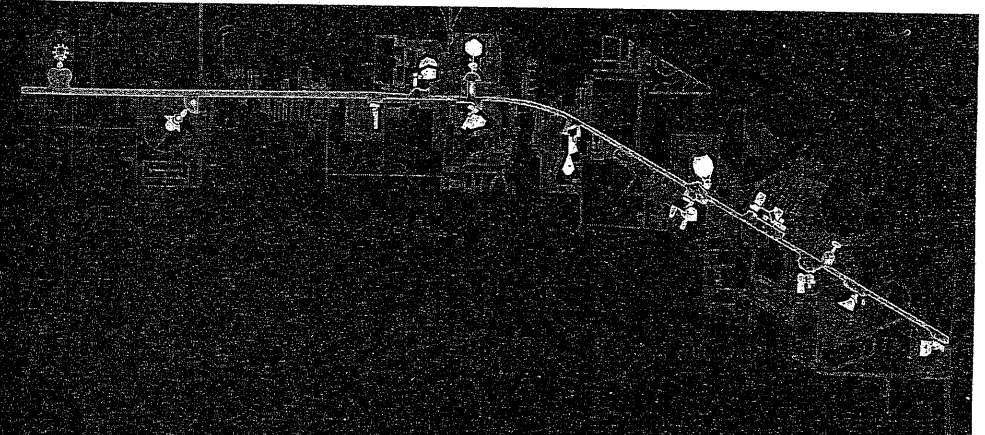
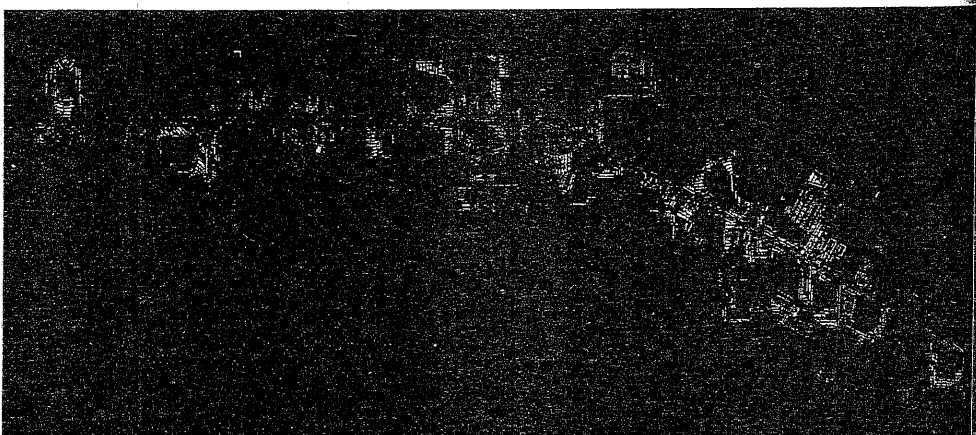
19d. Buildings

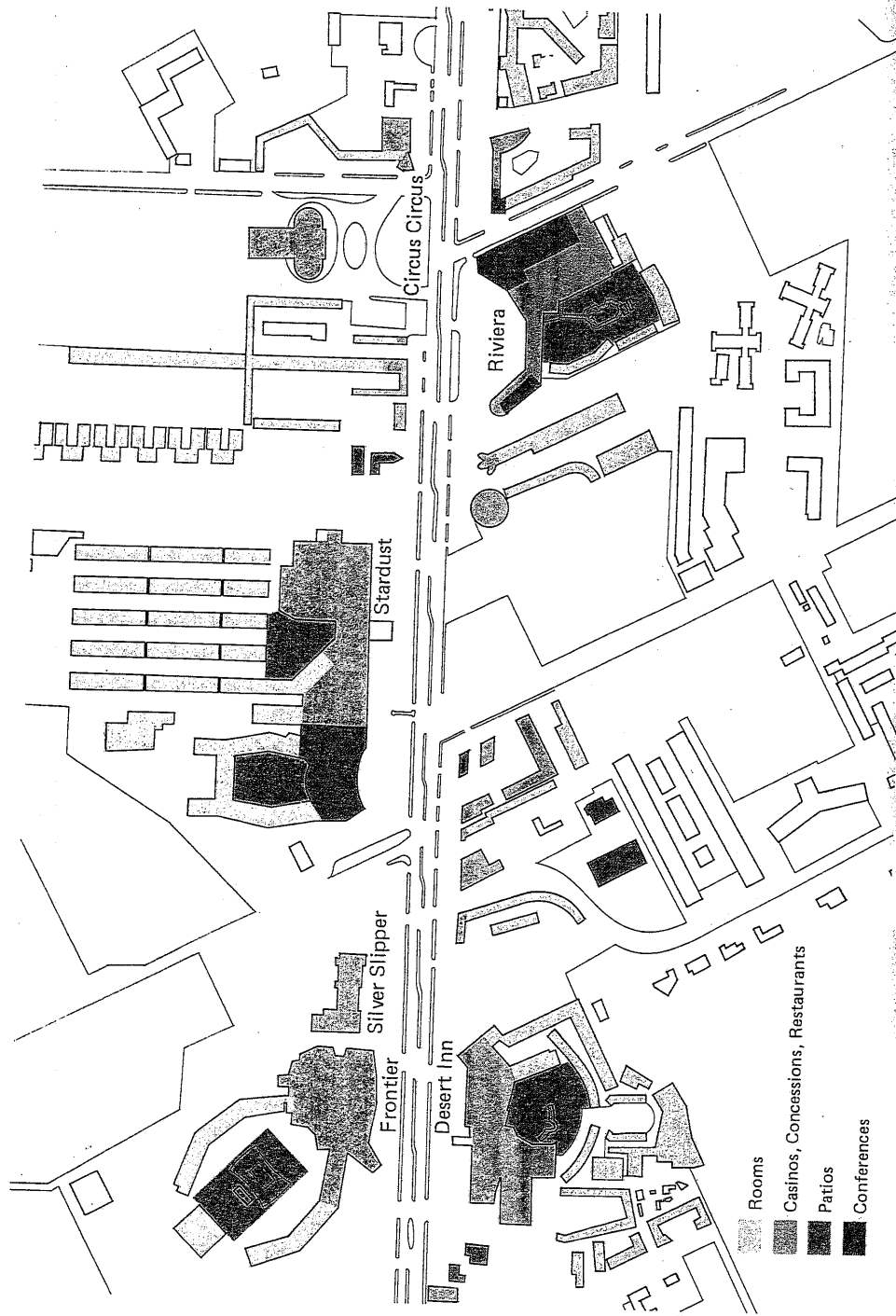


19b. Asphalt

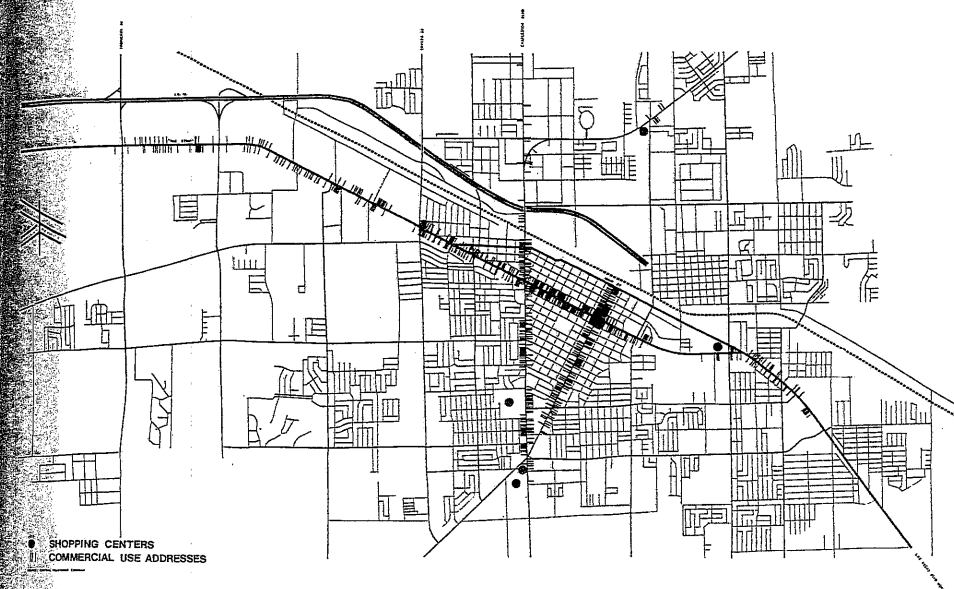


19e. Ceremonial space

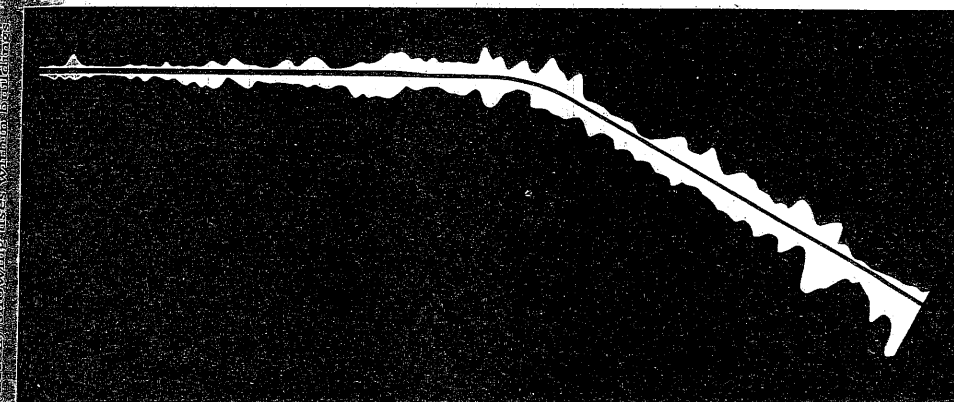




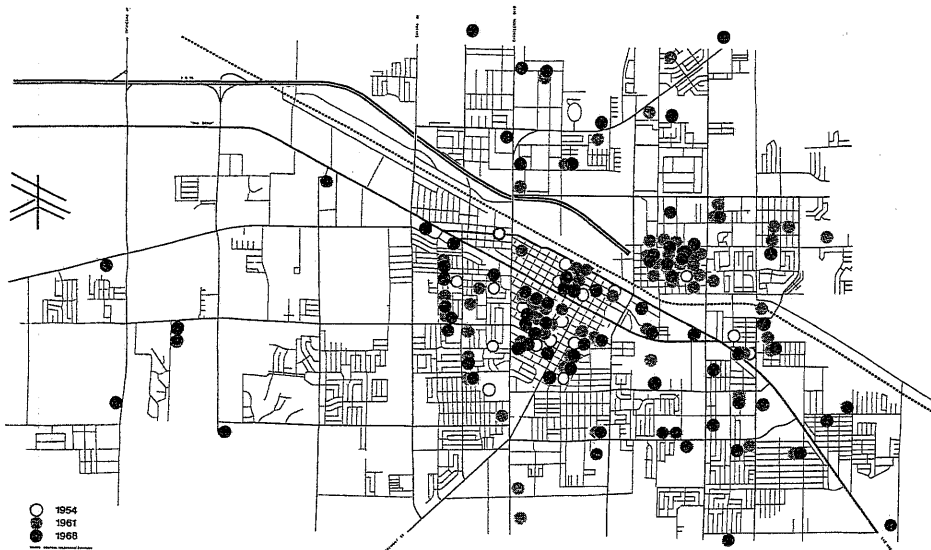
21. Map of Las Vegas Strip (center) showing ground floor commercial establishments (1961) on three Las Vegas strips



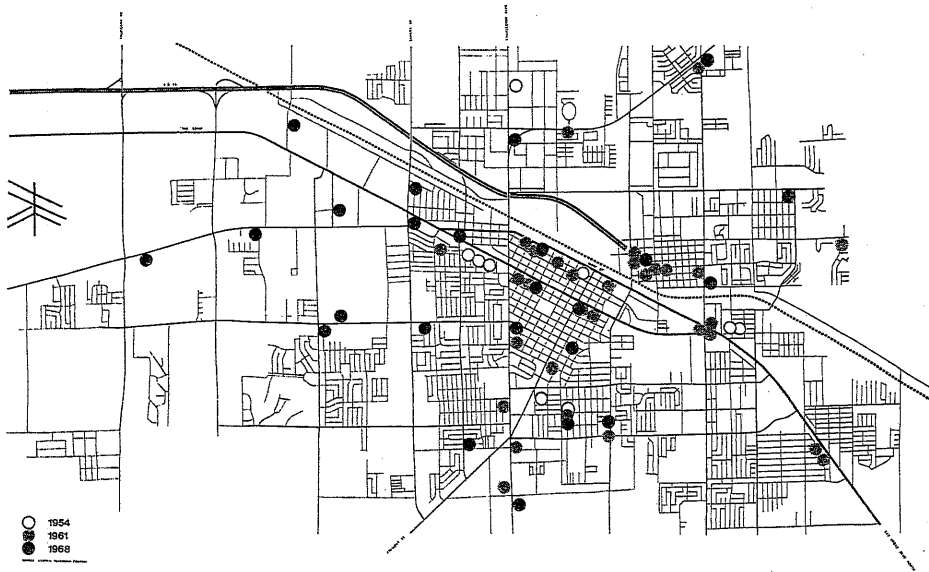
22. Map showing location of ground floor commercial establishments (1961) on three Las Vegas strips



23. Illumination levels on the Strip

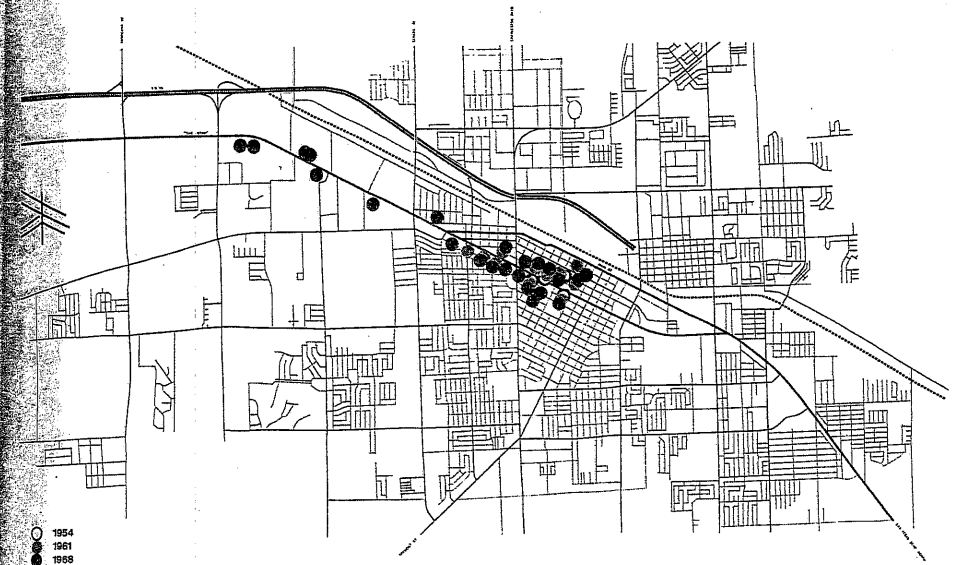


COMPARATIVE ACTIVITY PATTERNS: CHURCHES

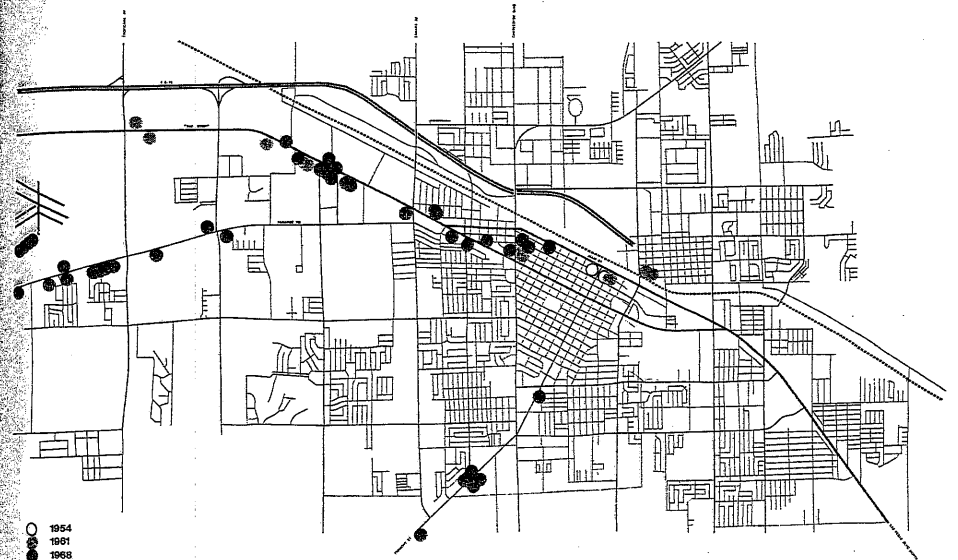


COMPARATIVE ACTIVITY PATTERNS: FOOD STORES

24-27. Maps showing comparative activity patterns: distribution of churches, food stores, wedding chapels, auto rentals



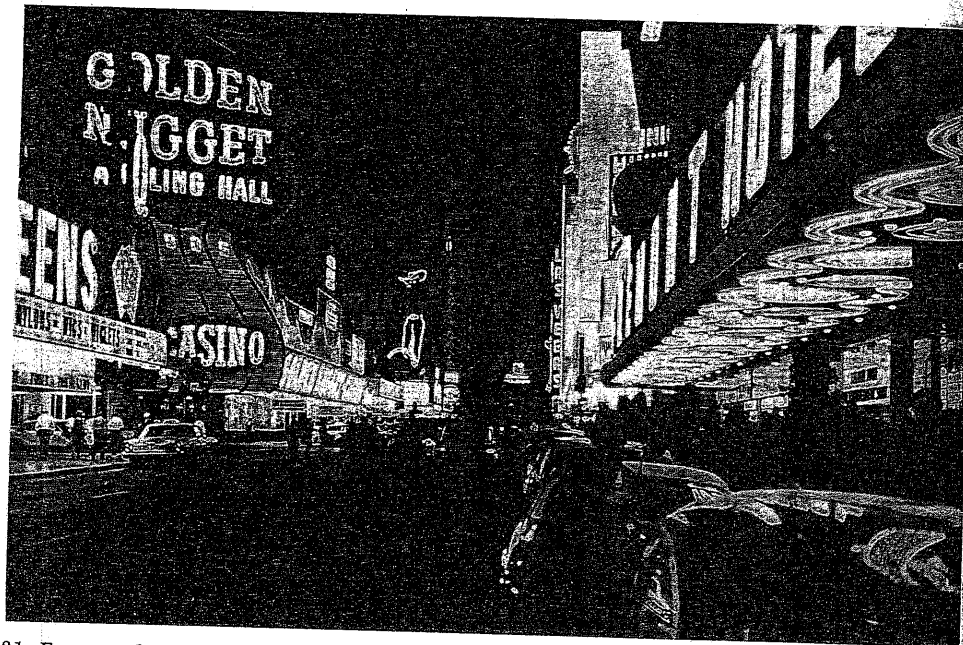
COMPARATIVE ACTIVITY PATTERNS: WEDDING CHAPELS



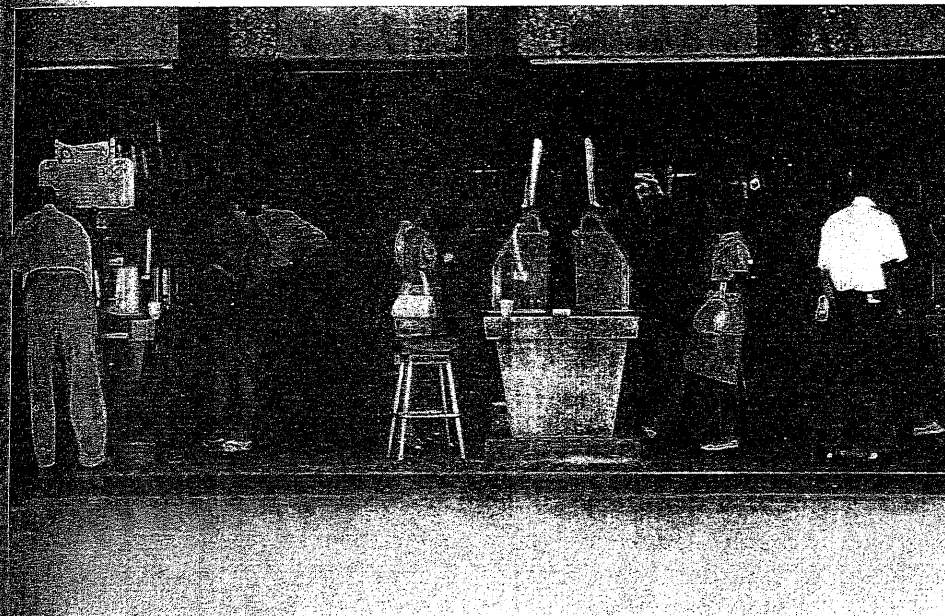
COMPARATIVE ACTIVITY PATTERNS: AUTOMOBILE RENTAL



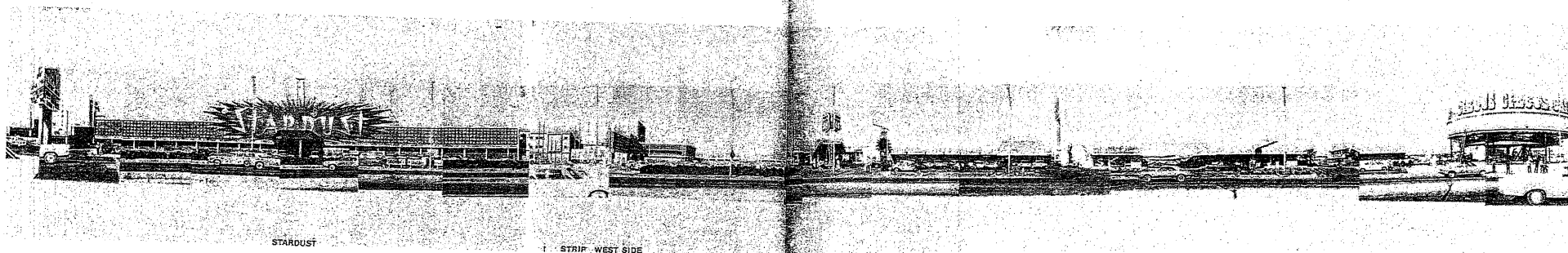




31. Fremont Street



32. Fremont Street casino entrance



33. A detail from an "Edward Ruscha" elevation of the Strip. Tourist maps are made of the Grand Canal and the Rhine showing the route lined by its palaces. Ruscha made one of the Sunset Strip. We imitated his for the Las Vegas Strip.

not required along the Strip because interaction is by car and highway. You *drive* from one casino to another even when they are adjacent because of the distance between them, and an intervening service station is not disagreeable.

### CHANGE AND PERMANENCE ON THE STRIP

The rate of obsolescence of a sign seems to be nearer to that of an automobile than that of a building. The reason is not physical degeneration but what competitors are doing around you. The leasing system operated by the sign companies and the possibility of total tax write-off may have something to do with it. The most unique, most monumental parts of the Strip, the signs and casino facades, are also the most changeable; it is the neutral, systems-motel structures behind that survive a succession of facelifts and a series of themes up front. The Aladdin Hotel and Casino is Moorish in front and Tudor behind (Fig. 13).

Las Vegas's greatest growth has been since World War II (Figs. 37-40). There are noticeable changes every year: new hotels and signs as well as neon-embossed parking structures replacing on-lot parking on and behind Fremont Street. Like the agglomeration of chapels in a Roman church and the stylistic sequence of piers in a Gothic cathedral, the Golden Nugget casino has evolved over 30 years from a building with a sign on it to a totally sign-covered building (Fig. 41). The Stardust Hotel has engulfed a small restaurant and a second hotel in its expansion and has united the three-piece facade with 600 feet of computer-programmed animated neon.

### § THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE STRIP

It is hard to think of each flamboyant casino as anything but unique, and this is as it should be, because good advertising technique requires the differentiation of the product. However, these casinos have much in common because they are under the same sun, on the same Strip, and perform similar functions; they differ from other casinos—say, on Fremont Street—and from other hotels that are not casinos (Figs. 42, 43).

A typical hotel-casino complex contains a building that is near enough to the highway to be seen from the road across the parked cars, yet far enough back to accommodate driveways, turnarounds, and parking. The parking in front is a token: It reassures the customer but does not obscure the building. It is prestige parking: The customer pays. The bulk of the parking, along the sides of the complex, allows direct access to the hotel yet stays visible from the highway. Parking is seldom at the back. The scales of movement and space of the highway relate to the

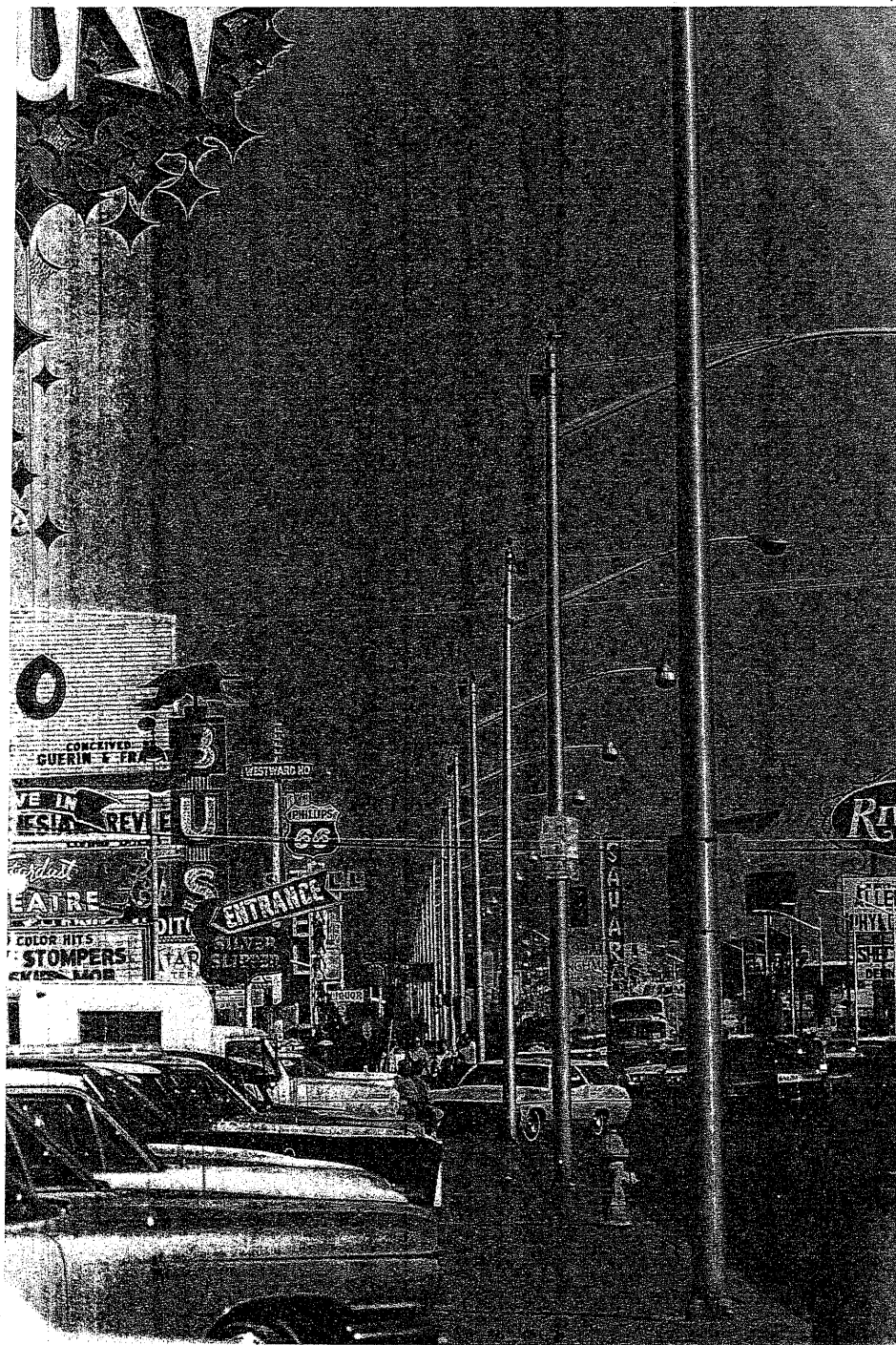
distances between buildings; because they are far apart, they can be comprehended at high speeds. Front footage on the Strip has not yet reached the value it once had on Main Street, and parking is still an appropriate filler. Big space between buildings is characteristic of the Strip. It is significant that Fremont Street is more photogenic than the Strip. A single postcard can carry a view of the Golden Horseshoe, the Mint Hotel, the Golden Nugget, and the Lucky Casino. A single shot of the Strip is less spectacular; its enormous spaces must be seen as moving sequences (Figs. 44, 45).

The side elevation of the complex is important, because it is seen by approaching traffic from a greater distance and for a longer time than the facade. The rhythmic gables on the long, low, English medieval style, half-timbered motel sides of the Aladdin read emphatically across the parking space (Fig. 46) and through the signs and the giant statue of the neighboring Texaco station, and contrast with the modern Near Eastern flavor of the casino front. Casino fronts on the Strip often inflect in shape and ornament toward the right, to welcome right-lane traffic. Modern styles use a porte cochere that is diagonal in plan. Brazilianoid International styles use free forms.

Service stations, motels, and other simpler types of buildings conform in general to this system of inflection toward the highway through the position and form of their elements. Regardless of the front, the back of the building is styleless, because the whole is turned toward the front and no one sees the back. The gasoline stations parade their universality (Fig. 47). The aim is to demonstrate their similarity to the one at home—your friendly gasoline station. But here they are not the brightest thing in town. This galvanizes them. A motel is a motel anywhere (Fig. 48). But here the imagery is heated up by the need to compete in the surroundings. The artistic influence has spread, and Las Vegas motels have signs like no others. Their ardor lies somewhere between the casinos and the wedding chapels. Wedding chapels, like many urban land uses, are not form-specific (Fig. 49). They tend to be one of a succession of uses a more generalized building type (a bungalow or a store front) may have. But a wedding-chapel style or image is maintained in different types through the use of symbolic ornament in neon, and the activity adapts itself to different inherited plans. Street furniture exists on the Strip as on other city streets, yet it is hardly in evidence.

Beyond the town, the only transition between the Strip and the Mojave Desert is a zone of rusting beer cans (Fig. 50). Within the town, the transition is as ruthlessly sudden. Casinos whose fronts relate so sensitively to the highway turn their ill-kempt backsides toward the local environment, exposing the residual forms and spaces of mechanical equipment and service areas.

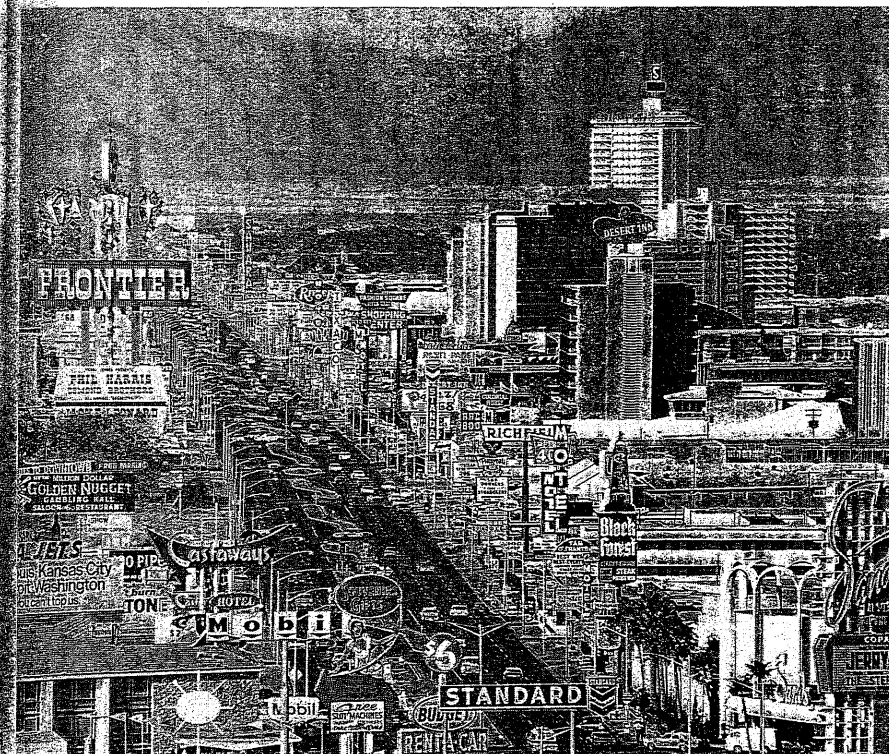




34. The order in this landscape is not obvious.

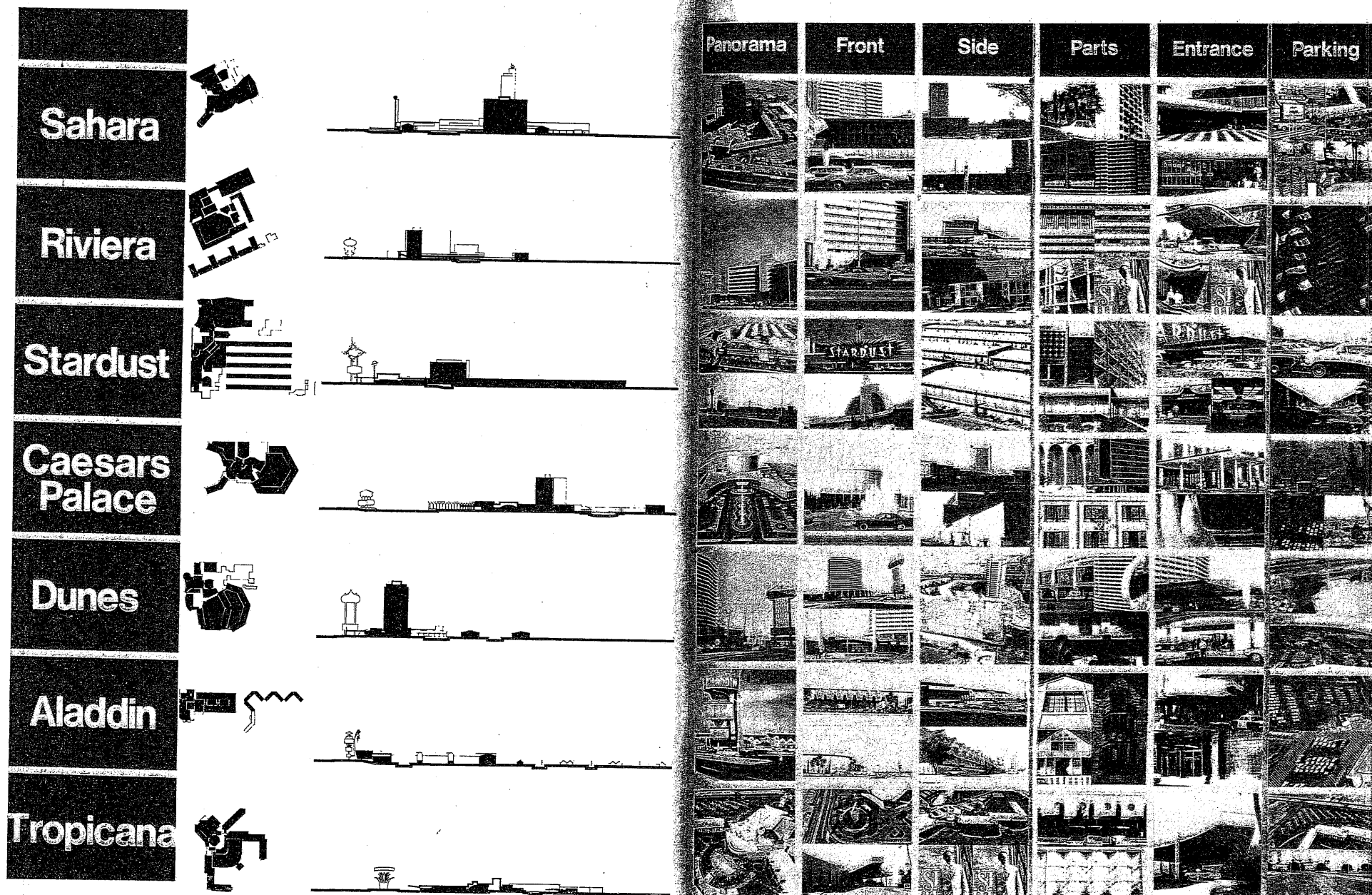


35. Streetlights, upper Strip



36. Upper Strip looking north





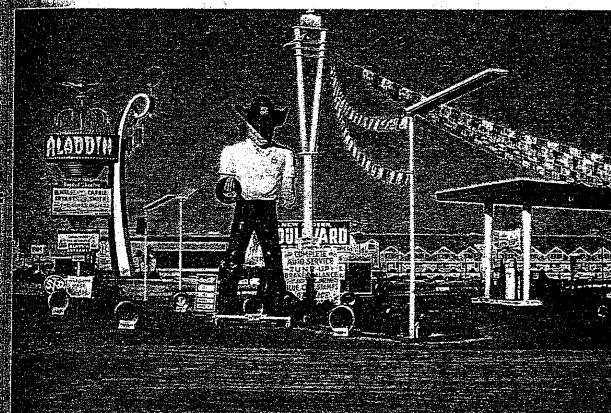
42. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip hotels: plans, sections, and elements



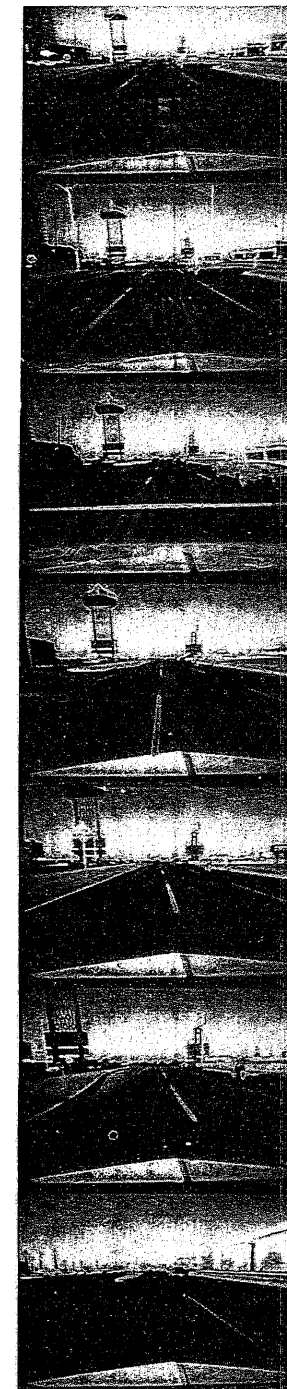
43.\* A schedule of Las Vegas Strip hotels: elements, continued



44. Fremont Street hotels and casinos



46. Aladdin Casino and Hotel



45. Portion of a movie sequence traveling north on the Strip



48. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip motels



49. A schedule of Las Vegas Strip wedding chapels



## SOME DEFINITIONS USING THE COMPARATIVE METHOD

*"Not innovating willfulness but reverence for the archetype."*  
Herman Melville

*"Incessant new beginnings lead to sterility."*  
Wallace Stevens

*"I like boring things."*  
Andy Warhol

To make the case for a new but old direction in architecture, we shall use some perhaps indiscreet comparisons to show what we are for and what we are against and ultimately to justify our own architecture. When architects talk or write, they philosophize almost solely to justify their own work, and this apologia will be no different. Our argument depends on comparisons, because it is simple to the point of banality. It needs contrast to point it up. We shall use, somewhat undiplomatically, some of the works of leading architects today as contrast and context.

We shall emphasize image—image over process or form—in asserting that architecture depends in its perception and creation on past experience and emotional association and that these symbolic and representational elements may often be contradictory to the form, structure, and program with which they combine in the same building. We shall survey this contradiction in its two main manifestations:

1. Where the architectural systems of space, structure, and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form. This kind of building-becoming-sculpture we call the *duck* in honor of the duck-shaped drive-in, "The Long Island Duckling," illustrated in *God's Own Junkyard* by Peter Blake (Fig. 73).<sup>1</sup>

2. Where systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them. This we call the *decorated shed* (Fig. 74).

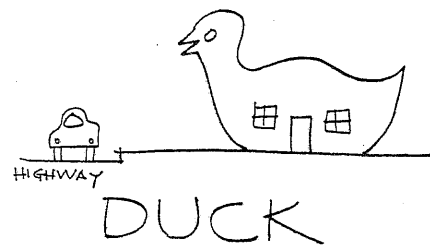
The duck is the special building that *is* a symbol; the decorated shed is the conventional shelter that *applies* symbols (Figs. 75, 76). We maintain that both kinds of architecture are valid—Chartres is a duck (although it is a decorated shed as well), and the Palazzo Farnese is a decorated shed—but we think that the duck is seldom relevant today, although it pervades Modern architecture.

We shall describe how we come by the automobile-oriented commer-

1. Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), p. 101. See also Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, "On Ducks and Decoration," *Architecture Canada* (October 1968).



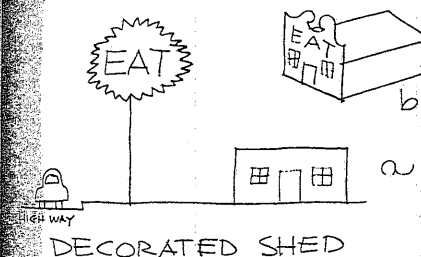
73. "Long Island Duckling" from *God's Own Junkyard*



75. Duck



74. Road scene from *God's Own Junkyard*



76. Decorated shed

cial architecture of urban sprawl as our source for a civic and residential architecture of meaning, viable now, as the turn-of-the-century industrial vocabulary was viable for a Modern architecture of space and industrial technology 40 years ago. We shall show how the iconography, rather than the space and piazzas of historical architecture, forms the background for the study of association and symbolism in commercial art and strip architecture.

Finally we shall argue for the symbolism of the ugly and ordinary in architecture and for the particular significance of the decorated shed with a rhetorical front and conventional behind: for architecture as shelter with symbols on it.

### THE DUCK AND THE DECORATED SHED

Let us elaborate on the decorated shed by comparing Paul Rudolph's Crawford Manor with our Guild House (in association with Cope and Lippincott; Figs. 77, 78). These two buildings are comparable in use, size, and date of construction: Both are high-rise apartments for the elderly, consisting of about 90 units, built in the mid-1960s. Their settings vary: Guild House, although freestanding, is a six-story imitation palazzo, analogous in structure and materials to the surrounding buildings and continuing, through its position and form, the street line of the Philadelphia gridiron plan it sits in. Crawford Manor, on the other hand, is unequivocally a soaring tower, unique in its Modern, Ville Radieuse world along New Haven's limited-access Oak Street Connector.

But it is the contrast in the *images* of these buildings in relation to their systems of construction that we want to emphasize. The system of construction and program of Guild House are ordinary and conventional and look it; the system of construction and program of Crawford Manor are ordinary and conventional but do not look it.

Let us interject here that we chose Crawford Manor for this comparison not because of any particular antagonism toward that building. It is, in fact, a skillful building by a skillful architect, and we could easily have chosen a much more extreme version of what we are criticizing. But in general we chose it because it can represent establishment architecture now (that is, it represents the great majority of what you see today in any architecture journal), and in particular because it corresponds in fundamental ways with Guild House. On the other hand, our choosing Guild House for comparison involves a disadvantage, because that building is now five years old, and some of our later work can more explicitly and vividly convey our current ideas. Last, please do not criticize us for primarily analyzing image: We are doing so simply because image is pertinent to our argument, not because we wish to deny an interest in or the importance of process, program, and struc-

ture or, indeed, social issues in architecture or in these two buildings. Along with most architects, we probably spend 90 percent of our design time on these other important subjects and less than 10 percent on the questions we are addressing here; they are merely not the direct subject of this inquiry.

To continue our comparisons, the construction of Guild House is poured-in-place concrete plate with curtain walls, pierced by double-hung windows and enclosing the interior space to make rooms. The material is common brick—darker than usual to match the smog-smudged brick of the neighborhood. The mechanical systems of Guild House are nowhere manifest in the outside forms. The typical floor plan contains a 1920s-apartment-house variety of units to accommodate particular needs, views, and exposures; this distorts the efficient grid of columns (Fig. 80). The structure of Crawford Manor, which is poured-in-place concrete with concrete block faced with a striated pattern, is likewise a conventional frame supporting laid-up masonry walls (Fig. 79). But it does not look it. It looks more advanced technologically and more progressive spatially. It looks as if its supports are spatial, perhaps mechanical-harboring shafts made of a continuous plastic material reminiscent of *béton brut* with the striated marks of violently heroic construction process embossed in their form. They articulate the flowing interior space, their structural purity never punctured by holes for windows or distorted by exceptions in the plan. Interior light is "modulated" by the voids between the structure and the "floating" cantilevered balconies (Fig. 81).

The architectural elements for supplying exterior light in Guild House are frankly windows. We relied on the conventional method of doing windows in a building, and we by no means thought through from the beginning the subject of exterior light modulation but started where someone else had left off before us. The windows look familiar; they *look like*, as well as *are*, windows, and in this respect their use is explicitly symbolic. But like all effective symbolic images, they are intended to look familiar and unfamiliar. They are the conventional element used slightly unconventionally. Like the subject matter of Pop Art, they are commonplace elements made uncommon through distortion in shape (slight), change in scale (they are much bigger than normal double-hung windows), and change in context (double-hung windows in a perhaps high-fashion building, Fig. 82).

### DECORATION ON THE SHED

Guild House has ornament on it; Crawford Manor does not (Fig. 83). The ornament on Guild House is explicit. It both reinforces and contradicts the form of the building it adorns. And it is to some extent sym-

bolic. The continuous stripe of white-glazed brick high on the facade, in combination with the plane of white-glazed brick below, divides the building into three uneven stories: basement, principal story, and attic. It contradicts the scale of the six real and equal floors on which it is imposed and suggests the proportions of a Renaissance palace. The central white panel also enhances the focus and scale of the entrance. It extends the ground floor to the top of the balcony of the second floor in the way, and for the same reasons, that the increased elaboration and scale around the door of a Renaissance palace or Gothic portal does. The exceptional and fat column in an otherwise flat wall surface increases the focus of the entrance, and the luxurious granite and glazed brick enhance the amenity there, as does the veined marble that developers apply at street level to make their apartment entrances more classy and rentable. At the same time, the column's position in the middle of the entrance diminishes its importance.

The arched window in Guild House is not structural. Unlike the more purely ornamental elements in this building, it reflects an interior function of the shed, that is, the common activities at the top. But the big common room itself is an exception to the system inside. On the front elevation, an arch sits above a central vertical stripe of balcony voids, whose base is the ornamental entrance. Arch, balconies, and base together unify the facade and, like a giant order (or classic jukebox front), undermine the six stories to increase the scale and monumentality of the front. In turn, the giant order is topped by a flourish, an unconnected, symmetrical television antenna in gold anodized aluminum, which is both an imitation of an abstract Lippold sculpture and symbol for the elderly. An open-armed, polychromatic, plaster madonna in this position would have been more imageful but unsuitable for a Quaker institution that eschews all outward symbols—as do Crawford Manor and most orthodox Modern architecture, which reject ornament and association in the perception of forms.

#### EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT ASSOCIATIONS

Adornments of representational sculpture on the roof, or a prettily shaped window, or wittiness or rhetoric of any kind are unthinkable for Crawford Manor. Nor would it sport appliques of expensive material on a column or white stripes and wainscoting copied from Renaissance compositions. For instance, Crawford Manor's cantilevered balconies are "structurally integrated"; they are parapeted with the overall structural material and devoid of ornament. Balconies at Guild House are not structural exercises, and the railings are adornments as well as recollections at a bigger scale of conventional patterns in stamped metal (Fig. 84).

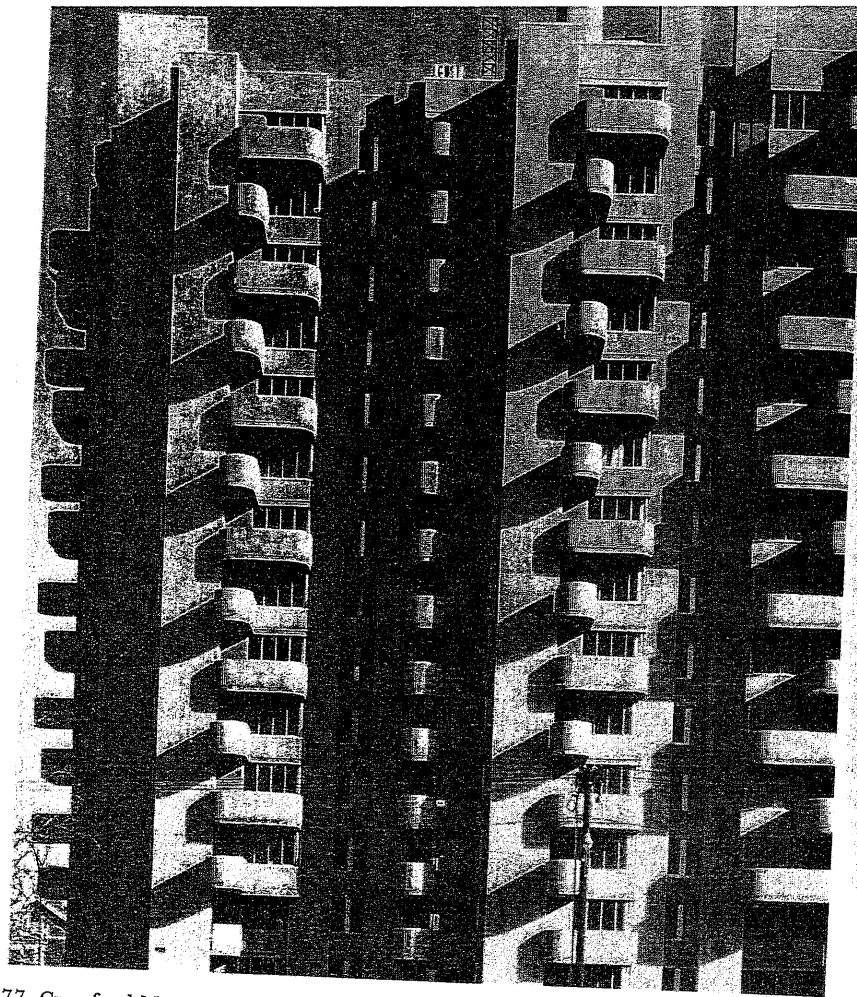
Guild House symbolism involves ornament and is more or less dependent on explicit associations; it looks like what it is not only because of what it is but also because of what it reminds you of. But the architectural elements of Crawford Manor abound in associations of another, less explicit, kind. Implicit in the pure architectural forms of Crawford Manor is a symbolism different from the appliqué ornament of Guild House with its explicit, almost heraldic, associations. The implicit symbolism of Crawford Manor we read into the undecorated physiognomy of the building through associations and past experience; it provides layers of meaning beyond the "abstract expressionist" messages derived from the inherent physiognomic characteristics of the forms—their size, texture, color, and so forth. These meanings come from our knowledge of technology, from the work and writings of the Modern form givers, from the vocabulary of industrial architecture, and from other sources. For instance, the vertical shafts of Crawford Manor connote structural piers (they are not structural), made of rusticated "reinforced concrete" (with mortar joints), harboring servant spaces and mechanical systems (actually kitchens), terminating in the silhouettes of exhaust systems (suitable to industrial laboratories), articulating light-modulating voids (instead of framing windows), articulating flowing space (confined to efficiency apartments but augmented by very ubiquitous balconies that themselves suggest apartment dwelling), and articulating program functions that protrude sensitively (or expressionistically) from the edges of the plan.

#### HEROIC AND ORIGINAL, OR UGLY AND ORDINARY

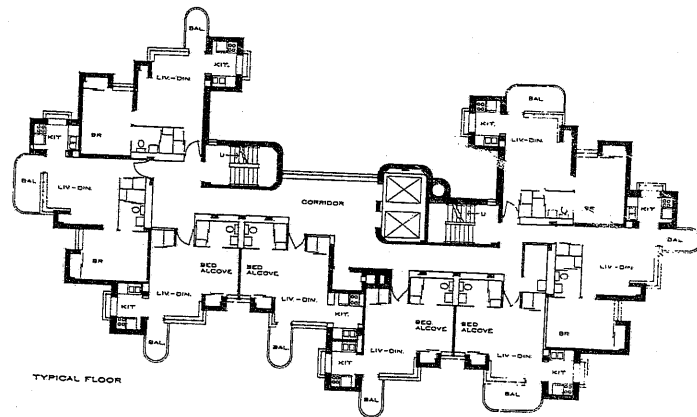
The content of Crawford Manor's implicit symbolism is what we call "heroic and original." Although the substance is conventional and ordinary, the image is heroic and original. The content of the explicit symbolism of Guild House is what we call "ugly and ordinary." The technologically unadvanced brick, the old-fashioned, double-hung windows, the pretty materials around the entrance, and the ugly antenna not hidden behind the parapet in the accepted fashion, all are distinctly conventional in image as well as substance or, rather, ugly and ordinary. (The inevitable plastic flowers at home in these windows are, rather, *pretty* and ordinary; they do not make this architecture look silly as they would, we think, the heroic and original windows of Crawford Manor, Fig. 85.)

But in Guild House, the symbolism of the ordinary goes further than this. The pretensions of the "giant order" on the front, the symmetrical, palazzolike composition with its three monumental stories (as well as its six real stories), topped by a piece of sculpture—or almost sculpture—suggest something of the heroic and original. It is true that in this

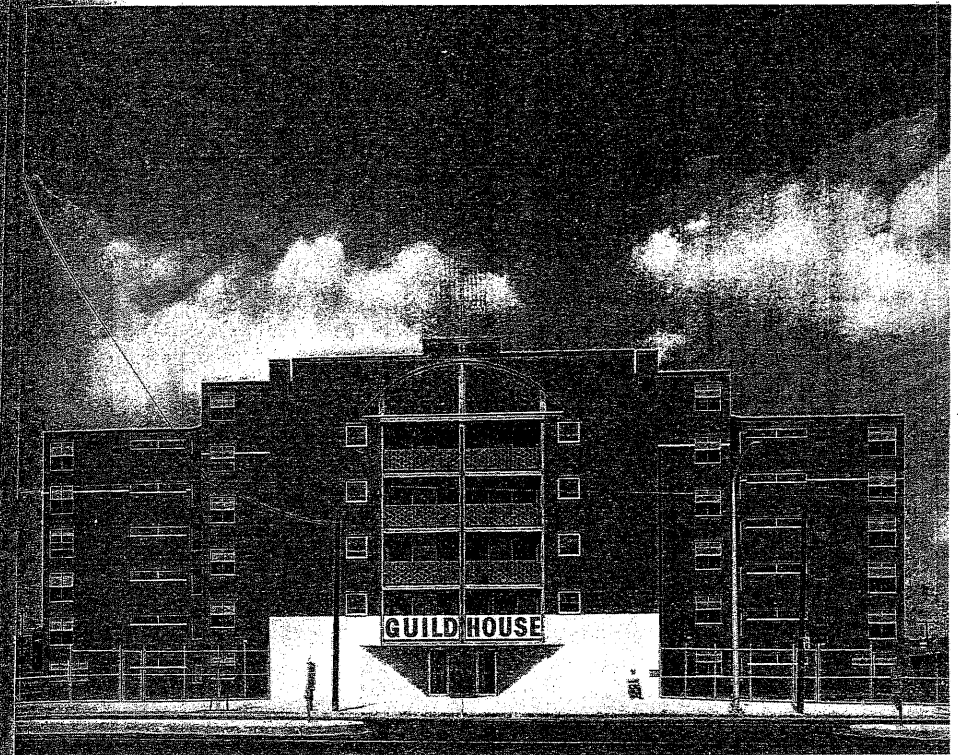




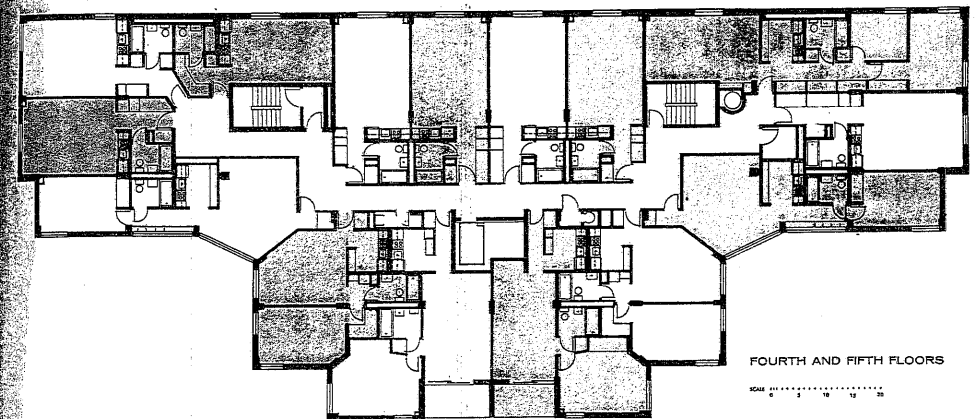
77. Crawford Manor, New Haven, 1962-1966; Paul Rudolph



79. Crawford Manor, typical plan

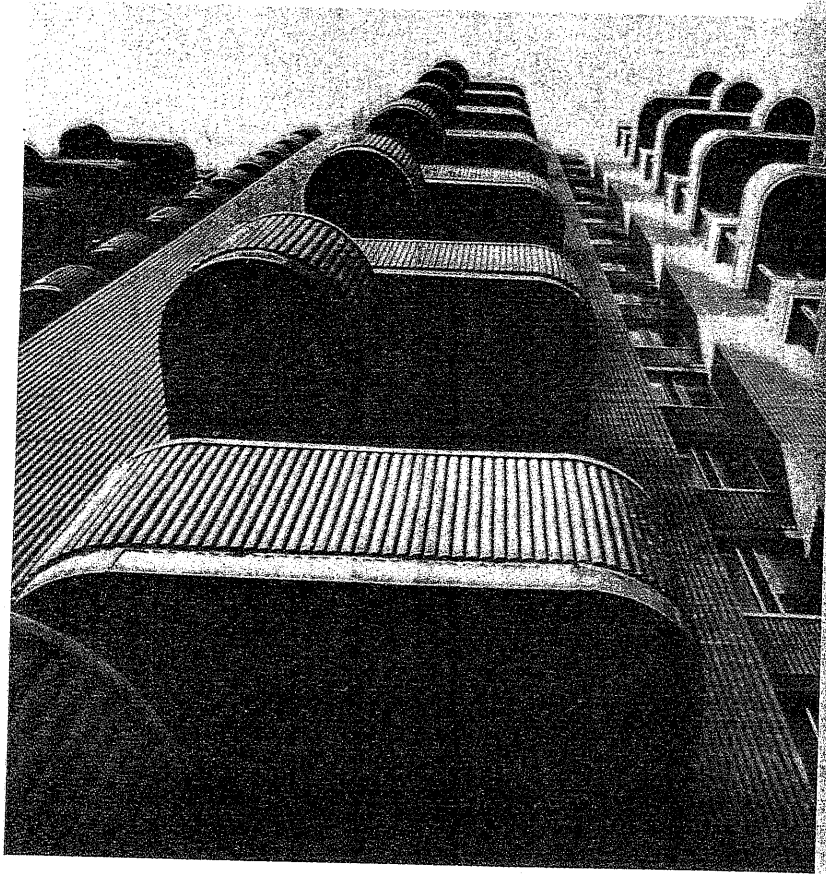


78. Guild House, Friends' Housing for the Elderly, Philadelphia, 1960-1963; Venturi and Rauch, Cope and Lippincott, Associates

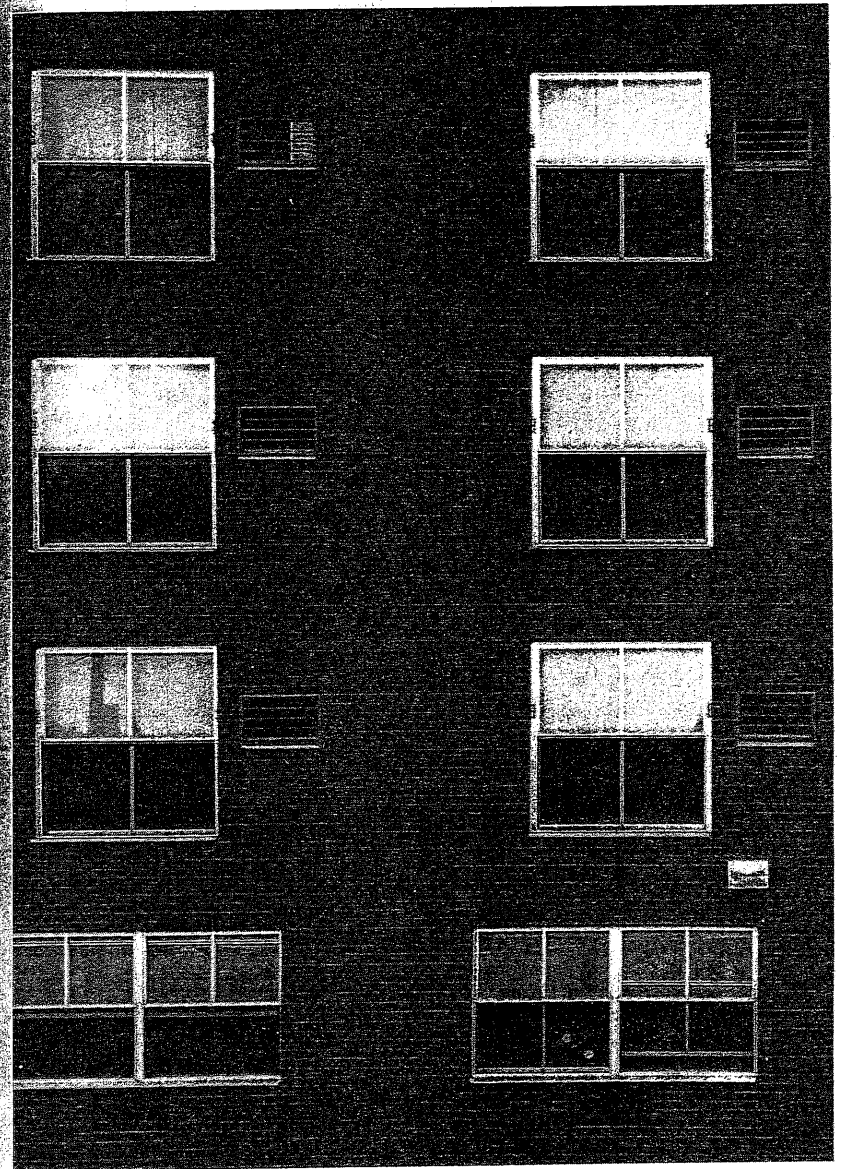


80. Guild House, typical plan

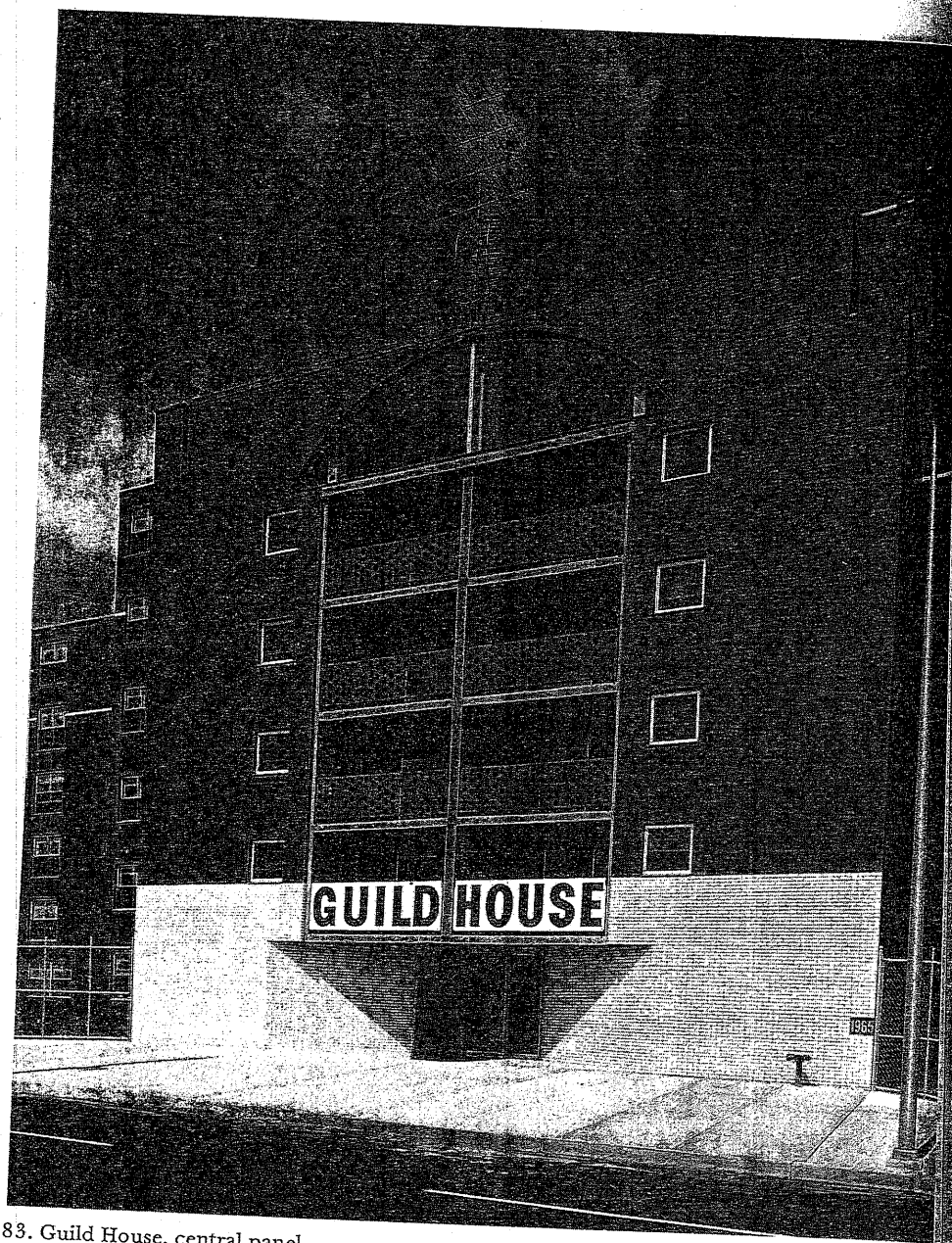




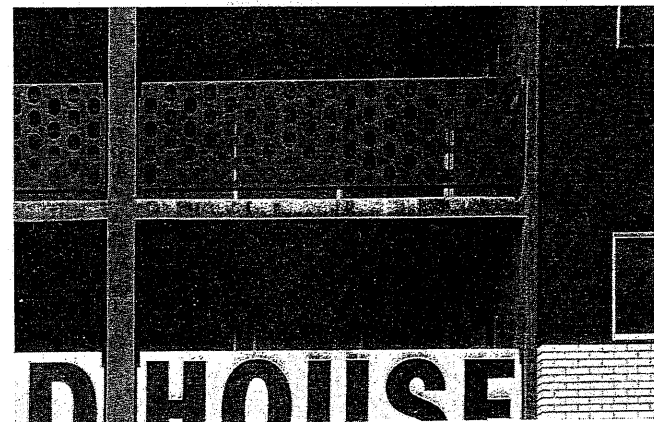
81. Crawford Manor (detail)



82. Guild House, windows



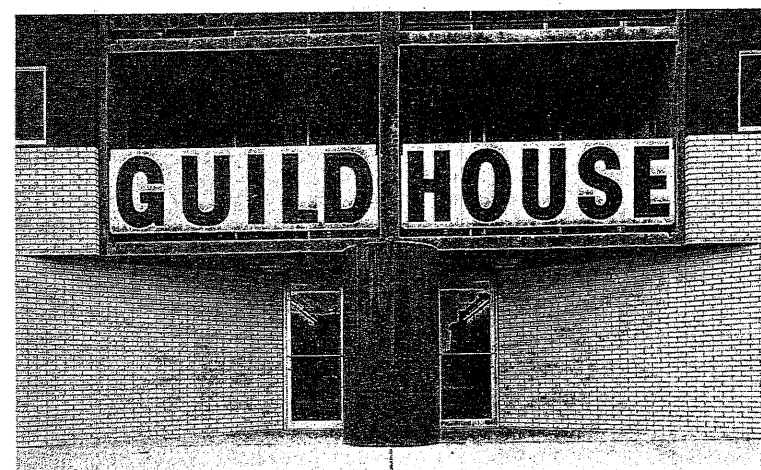
83. Guild House, central panel



84. Guild House, balcony



85. Guild House, detail of window



86. Guild House, sign

case the heroic and original facade is somewhat ironical, but it is this juxtaposition of contrasting symbols—the appliqué of one order of symbols on another—that constitutes for us the decorated shed. This is what makes Guild House an architect's decorated shed—not architecture without architects.

The purest decorated shed would be some form of conventional systems-building shelter that corresponds closely to the space, structure, and program requirements of the architecture, and upon which is laid a contrasting—and, if in the nature of the circumstances, contradictory—decoration. In Guild House the ornamental-symbolic elements are more or less literally appliqué: The planes and stripes of white brick are appliqué; the street facade through its disengagement at the top corners implies its separation from the bulk of the shed at the front. (This quality also implies continuity, and therefore unity, with the street line of facades of the other older, nonfreestanding buildings on each side.) The symbolism of the decoration happens to be ugly and ordinary with a dash of ironic heroic and original, and the shed is straight ugly and ordinary, though in its brick and windows it is symbolic too. Although there is ample historical precedent for the decorated shed, present-day roadside commercial architecture—the \$10,000 stand with the \$100,000 sign—was the immediate prototype of our decorated shed. And it is in the sign of Guild House that the purest manifestation of the decorated shed and the most vivid contrast with Crawford Manor lies.

#### ORNAMENT: SIGNS AND SYMBOLS, DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION, HERALDRY AND PHYSIOGNOMY, MEANING AND EXPRESSION

A sign on a building carries a denotative meaning in the explicit message of its letters and words. It contrasts with the connotative expression of the other, more architectural elements of the building. A big sign, like that over the entrance of Guild House, big enough to be read from passing cars on Spring Garden Street, is particularly ugly and ordinary in its explicit commercial associations (Fig. 86). It is significant that the sign for Crawford Manor is modest, tasteful, and not commercial. It is too small to be seen from fast-moving cars on the Oak Street Connector. But signs as explicit symbols, especially big, commercial-looking signs, are anathema in architecture such as Crawford Manor. Its identification comes, not through explicit, denotative communication, through literally spelling out "I am Guild House," but through the connotation implicit in the physiognomy of its pure architectural form, which is intended to express in some way housing for the elderly.

We have borrowed the simple literary distinctions between "denotative" and "connotative" meanings and applied them to the heraldic and

physiognomic element in architecture. To clarify further, the sign saying GUILD HOUSE denotes meaning through its words; as such, it is the heraldic element *par excellence*. The character of the graphics, however, connotes institutional dignity, while, contradictorily, the size of the graphics connotes commercialism. The position of the sign perhaps also connotes entering. The white-glazed brick denotes decoration as a unique and rich appliqué on the normal-red brick. Through the location of the white areas and stripes on the facade, we have tried connotatively to suggest floor levels associated with palaces and thereby palace-like scale and monumentality. The double-hung windows denote their function, but their grouping connotes domesticity and ordinary meanings.

Denotation indicates specific meaning; connotation suggests general meanings. The same element can have both denotative and connotative meanings, and these may be mutually contradictory. Generally, to the extent that it is denotative in its meaning, an element depends on its heraldic characteristics; to the extent that it is connotative, an element depends on its physiognomic qualities. Modern architecture (and Crawford Manor as its exemplar) has tended to shun the heraldic and denotative in architecture and to exaggerate the physiognomic and connotative. Modern architecture uses expressive ornament and shuns explicit symbolic ornament.

In sum, we have analyzed Guild House and Crawford Manor in terms of content of the image and in terms of method used to achieve image. A comparative catalog of Guild House versus Crawford Manor in these terms is shown in Table 1.

#### IS BORING ARCHITECTURE INTERESTING?

For all its commonness, is Guild House boring? For all its dramatic balconies, is Crawford Manor interesting? Is it not, perhaps, the other way around? Our criticism of Crawford Manor and the buildings it stands for is not moralistic, nor is it concerned with so-called honesty in architecture or a lack of correspondence between substance and image *per se*; Crawford Manor is ugly and ordinary while looking heroic and original. We criticize Crawford Manor not for "dishonesty," but for irrelevance today. We shall try to show how, in both the method and content of its images, Crawford Manor, as well as the architecture it represents, has impoverished itself by rejecting denotative ornament and the rich tradition of iconography in historical architecture and by ignoring—or rather using unawares—the connotative expression it substituted for decoration. When it cast out eclecticism, Modern architecture submerged symbolism. Instead it promoted expressionism, concentrating on the expression of architectural elements themselves: on the

Table 1. Comparison of Guild House and Crawford Manor

Guild House	Crawford Manor
An architecture of meaning	An architecture of expression
Explicit "denotative" symbolism	Implicit "connotative" symbolism
Symbolic ornament	Expressive ornament
Applied ornament	Integral expressionism
Mixed media	Pure architecture
Decoration by the attaching of superficial elements	Unadmitted decoration by the articulation of integral elements
Symbolism	Abstraction
Representational art	"Abstract expressionism"
Evocative architecture	Innovative architecture
Societal messages	Architectural content
Propaganda	Architectural articulation
High and low art	High art
Evolutionary, using historical precedent	Revolutionary, progressive, anti-traditional
Conventional	Creative, unique, and original
Old words with new meanings	New words
Ordinary	Extraordinary
Expedient	Heroic
Pretty in front	Pretty (or at least unified) all around
Inconsistent	Consistent
Conventional technology	Advanced technology
Tendency toward urban sprawl	Tendency toward megastructure
Starts from client's value system	Tries to elevate client's value system and/or budget by reference to Art and Metaphysics
Looks cheap	Looks expensive
"Boring"	"Interesting"

expression of structure and function. It suggested, through the image of the building, reformist-progressive social and industrial aims that it could seldom achieve in reality. By limiting itself to strident articulations of the pure architectural elements of space, structure, and program, Modern architecture's expression has become a dry expressionism, empty and boring—and in the end irresponsible. Ironically, the Modern architecture of today, while rejecting explicit symbolism and frivolous appliqué ornament, has distorted the whole building into one big ornament. In substituting "articulation" for decoration, it has become a duck.